インテリビレッジの座敷童(ざしきわらし)5

鎌池和馬

イラスト／真早

電撃文庫

インテリビレッジの座敷童⑤

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インテリビレッジの座敷童⑤

鎌池和馬 イラスト／真早

菱神 艶美(ひしがみ えんび)

『きな臭い事件現場』に何故か頻繁に遭遇する推理マニア。カジノ島に合わせてバニーで登場！

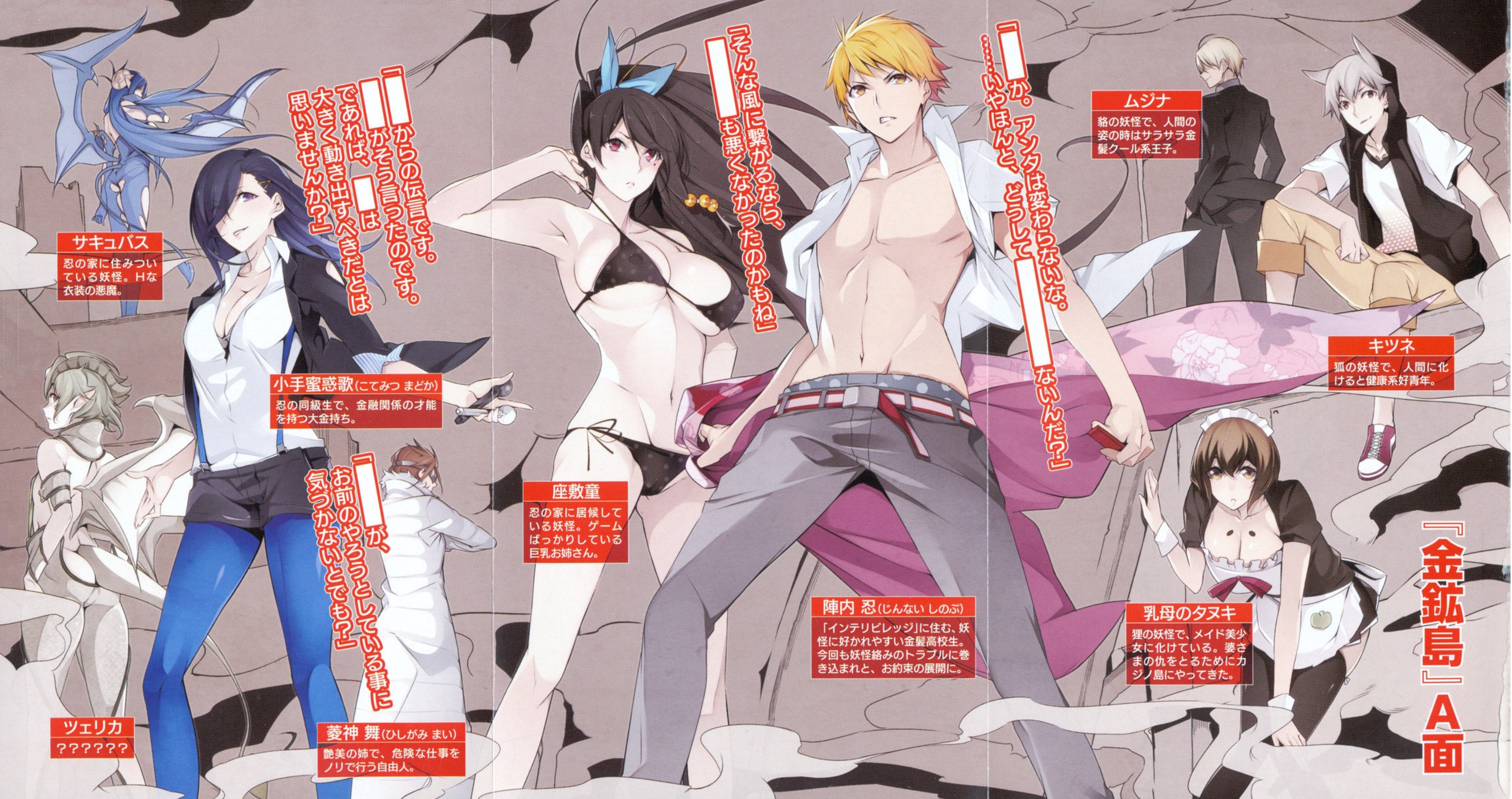
すねこすり

菱神舞のパートナーで、見た目は小型犬の妖怪。こんな姿だが、たまに男気を見せることも。

陣内忍の黙示録　A面
OP_code"Personal_apocalypse". ——010
Notice// ——230
陣内忍の黙示録　B面
OP_code"Rail_song_jail". ——232
PACKAGE_console_system_Ver.010.56. ——396
渇望 ——412

もくじ

デザイン／渡邊宏一（有限会社ニイナナニイゴオ）


「――からの伝言です。――がそう言ったのです。であれば、――は大きく動き出すべきだとは思いませんか？」
「そんな風に繋がるなら、――も悪くなかったのかもね」
「――か。アンタは変わらないな。……いやほんと、どうして――ないんだ？」
「――が、お前のやろうとしている事に気づかないとでも？」
サキュバス
忍の家に住みついている妖怪。Hな衣装の悪魔。
小手蜜惑歌(こてみつ まどか)
忍の同級生で、金融関係の才能を持つ大金持ち。
ツェリカ
??????
菱神 舞(ひしがみ まい)
艶美の姉で、危険な仕事をノリで行う自由人。
座敷童
忍の家に居候している妖怪。ゲームばっかりしている巨乳お姉さん。
陣内 忍(じんない しのぶ)
「インテリビレッジ」に住む、妖怪に好かれやすい金髪高校生。今回も妖怪絡みのトラブルに巻き込まれと、お約束の展開に。
ムジナ
貉の妖怪で、人間の姿の時はサラサラ金髪クール系王子。
キツネ
狐の妖怪で、人間に化けると健康系好青年。
乳母のタヌキ
狸の妖怪で、メイド美少女に化けている。婆さまの仇をとるためにカジノ島にやってきた。
『金鉱島』A面

シド＝クラウズ
豪華客船内で舞とすねこすりの前に現れた男。年齢の割に筋肉質な体型で、シックなスーツを纏う。
「はひいっ!? こっ、小桜誘って言いますぅ！話します、全部ざくっと話しますからっ!!」
小桜 誘(こざくら そびき)
隼と艶美をいきなり襲撃してきたセーラー服の美少女。彼女もまた、金鉱島の秘密が関わるらしいのだが。
蓮河 弓(はすかわ ゆみ)
菱神舞が豪華客船で遭遇したメイドさん。ただし、魔窟と化した豪華客船にいるという事は、只者ではないようで……？
「あなたが手に入れば、全て丸く収められる」
天邪鬼
あらゆる質問に嘘の答えを返し、人の心を読み、口真似や物真似で人を驚かせる妖怪で、致命誘発体。
古珠 亮(こだま りょう)
カジノで連戦連勝のギャンブラー。妖怪ご法度のカジノ内で、なにかしらの「パッケージ」を使用しているらしい。
「つまり、つまりこういう事だよ少年！」
「きゃーきゃー」
臼挽き童(うすひきわらし)
縁と同じく、座敷童の一種。居着いた家に富と繁栄をもたらし、純金を操ることもできると言われている。
『金鉱島』B面

Jinnai Shinobu's Apocalypse — Side A — OP_code"Personal_apocalypse"

Part ? (3rd person — Day ??/?? ??:?? - ??:??)

“Lost baggage? …What? You mean, um, wait. So it was lost!? But that ‘item’ was top secret!!”

“It’s already gone, so there’s no use complaining about it. Or do you think that’s going to magically make it appear?”

“If it was that important, why didn’t you keep it with your carry-on baggage? I’m going to officially report this!!”

“I didn’t want something that dangerous on me! I know plenty of people who assumed a domestic flight was safe and came to regret it!!”

“Okay, understood. Everyone, we need to calm down. The carrier decided to transport the ‘item’ by hiding it in a civilian travel bag, but that travel bag has gone missing as lost baggage. Is that clear?”

“Can’t we track the bag?”

“If we’d attached a transmitter, the signal would have been intercepted. It would be like telling the entire world to come take it from us.”

“You mean…”

“No one knows what airport it ended up at.”

“The airline isn’t stupid. They’ll find it before long and contact the civilian student. There’s nothing we can do until that student picks up his travel bag.”

“Could someone fake their identity so we can collect the bag ourselves?”

“Do you *want* to stand out? That would increase the risk of revealing the ‘item’s’ existence, you know?”

“…Dammit.”

“Now you’re catching on. Unfortunately, all we can do now is pray.”

Part 2 (Day 10/03 20:30 - 21:20)

“Mn…”

I awoke to the sensation of something dripping from my mouth.

After a slight delay, I noticed the noisy hustle and bustle of movement from all directions, so I tried to remember where I was.

“Shinobu.”

Before I could determine the situation, I heard the familiar voice of a glamorous Zashiki Warashi.

“You can use me as a body pillow if you want, but try not to get drool on my yukata. Or do you want me to hit you?”

“Whoa!!!???”

I frantically jumped up from the bench and my right calf cramped unnaturally. I ended up rolling around on the hard floor and performed an equivalent of first aid by extending my knee, grabbing my toes in both hands, and pulling them forward.

Only then did I remember where I was.

Oh, that’s right.

This was the lobby of a floating domestic airport connected to an Intellectual Village named Goldmine Island. I was waiting for an employee to contact me about the whereabouts of my lost travel bag and my parents had already gone on to the inn. … Of course, I didn’t really think I was going to get my bag that day since no one could say which airport it had been sent to.

Trouble on the first day of a trip? What did I do to deserve this?

It was a weekday, but being the son of an Intellectual Village artisan gave me the excuse I needed to officially take some time off of school. It was thought that studying my father’s work would be more useful than rote learning using textbooks and a blackboard.

For that reason, this trip felt a lot like part of my dad’s work.

Of course, being with my parents restricted what I could do, but being able to skip school while everyone else was stuck their studying still felt liberating.

“I don’t think it’s coming today. At this rate, you’ll be waiting until dawn with the people spending the night in the airport to save some money.”

“I guess I’ll go tell them my cell number, then.”

“It’s not like you have anything in your bag you don’t want them to see, right?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I had my nice underwear in there.”

I exchanged my contact information with the airport worker who took the extremely American stance of keeping his back oddly straight and refusing to apologize despite admitting their error. After that, I left the floating airport with the Zashiki Warashi.

An overwhelming deluge of light seemed to sweep away the darkness of night as it filled my vision.

Everywhere I looked, I saw neon, neon, and more neon. The ideas of energy conservation and global warming were thrown out the window and everything glowed like a house that took its Christmas decorations too far. I saw playing cards, roulettes, bunny girls, rolls of cash, and bags of coins. Even without checking each of the symbols creating an overall electronic sign motif, anyone could tell what this place was.

“Welcome to Japan’s Vegas! This is the special casino district of Goldmine Island!!”

Someone called out to me after I took just three steps off the airport's grounds.

A middle-aged driver was leaning against the side of a white limousine that was stretched out like a dachshund.

"Where do you need to go? You look like a kid, but if you've got a Zashiki Warashi with you, you must be pretty rich. If you're not sure where to have some fun, how about I show you around? There's no age limit with the publicly managed gambling of a special casino district, you know? How about a toast to the loopholes of an experimental system!?"

"Oh… I just want to get to the inn. But if I'm going to take a long vehicle, a bus is enough."

"Do you really think you're going to find something that cheap-looking around here? This is Japan's Vegas. Having me carry your ass around is the cheapest option. Even helicopters and cruisers are pretty common here. And if it's just carrying you somewhere, a limo's not that different from a normal taxi. The first ride's eight hundred yen and every three hundred meters adds another hundred and twenty yen. That's a pretty fair system, don't you think?"

"Just to be sure, you are actually licensed to do this, aren't you?"

"You want to go check the plate on the back? It's green and everything. And don't worry. I'm not some crooked businessman who drives you around and around the island and demands you pay me tens of thousands. What, is this your first time with this kind of thing? You're all nervous."

The island itself was small, so the price wouldn't be too high if I didn't take a bunch of detours. I had him show me a map and getting to the inn would only cost me two thousand yen.

"Fine. You win. But I only have two thousand yen in my wallet, so get me to the inn before the meter goes above that."

"Ha ha ha. Is that your allowance or something!?"

"I can't deny that I'm here on a trip with my parents, but this has more to do with my lost baggage. Most of my stuff was sent off to some other airport."

The Zashiki Warashi and I climbed into the back seat of the white limousine. We found the kind of fantastical space I'd seen in movies, but I didn't dare touch the mini-fridge. Who could say how much I would be charged just to open the door.

The middle-aged man's voice reached us from the distant driver's seat.

"So where to?"

"Um… An inn called the Gold Crane."

"If you want make out or something, I can close the smoked glass divider for some privacy."

"You can leave it open and mind your own business."

The pure white limousine took off surprisingly roughly and slipped into the nighttime casino city. I looked out the window and the explosively bright neon was enough to see some palm trees here and there.

“Even Kyushu is far enough south to count as tropical, isn’t it?”

“The muddy goldmine mountain has changed a lot too. Nowadays, things are weighted more towards the tourists. Even the abandoned buildings from when this place was called Heavy Cruiser Island are a popular sightseeing spot.”

“Wasn’t that used as the setting for a video game?”

“A zombie one. Why are those things so popular overseas, anyway?”

Perhaps because it was a casino city, people were walking around in clothes you would never see in a normal city. There were bunny girls trying to attract customers and even derivatives that had where those bunny ears? There were also gentlemen and ladies in suits and dresses and…

“Wh-what are those? There are a bunch of female police officers in really gaudy miniskirts. They look like something from an American pinup magazine.”

“Those aren’t police officers; they’re armed guards. This is still an Intellectual Village and no one wants to give the police any more authority. But as a business, they need to give their customers what they want. …Simply put, there are a surprising number of people who want to be stepped on with black leather boots.”

The Indoor Youkai had been awfully quiet for a while. I assumed her special shyness skill had activated, but that apparently wasn’t it.

“Ahh… I don’t like how bright this place is. It’s making my head hurt.”

“But this is technically classified as an Intellectual Village.”

“How?”

“The mountain on the back side of the island has apparently been a goldmine for ages, so maybe you’ll feel better once we get there.”

Youkai naturally hated cities, but as a human, I wasn’t sure how to imagine it. It just didn’t seem real. I always pictured it as something like feeling carsick or the people who couldn’t stand the low frequency waves from wind turbines.

“Oh, right, right,” said the driver without turning around. “You should be careful.”

“About what?”

“You can bring your pretty Zashiki Warashi around with you if you want, but Youkai are forbidden in the casinos. Sneaking one in is enough for people to suspect you of cheating. After all, you could cheat all you wanted with their mysterious powers. Look.”

He pointed his thumb out the window.

I followed it and saw a security guard in a dark suit chucking what looked like stuffed animals out a casino exit and onto the sidewalk.

No, wait.

“What are those? A tanuki, a fox, and…”

“That last one’s probably a badger. Getting thrown out like that is what happens if you’re lucky. Sometimes they’re dealt with in ways I’d rather not mention.”

“Wasn’t this special casino district made to test a system that wouldn’t allow *large criminal organizations* a way in?”

“And? The stereotypical bad guys aren’t the only ones you have to watch out for. Not to mention that Japan’s Vegas is an experimental system, so it’s hardly perfect.”

The Zashiki Warashi groaned next to me and it seemed to be a warning that we needed to shut up because we were giving her a headache.

As we continued down a road wide enough for a mid-sized charter plane to land on, the white limousine left the casino city and began to circle around to the other side of the island.

The light quickly vanished.

We were now in a black world that looked like someone had rubbed ink over everything. I was sure there was a nice starry sky and firefly lights to see, but my eyes had adjusted to the previous dazzling light and had difficulty picking up that subtler artwork of light. There were tropical trees everywhere that generally seemed to be pineapple-like trees or looked like you could make a leaf swimsuit from them, but there were some maple and gingko trees mixed in. However, even those felt like a part of a giant mountain of black shadows.

Meanwhile, the Zashiki Warashi had stopped groaning like someone with a hangover and looked a lot more alert.

“I feel a lot better now.”

“Oh, is that so? I’m amazed the overall atmosphere can change so much on the same island. There isn’t a single streetlight around here. And what are those lined up over there? Abandoned buildings?”

“They’re probably the housing complexes and theatres from when this place was called Heavy Cruiser Island. If the driver is to be believed, they’re a valuable sightseeing resource that brings in people from all over Japan who are obsessed with old buildings.”

It may have been a part of his job because the middle-aged man answered any of our questions.

The buildings looked on the verge of collapse, but he said they were thoroughly reinforced with some kind of plastic so people could safely view them. At the same time, quite a few sensors and personnel had been installed or hired to make sure drunks didn’t try to spray paint graffiti on them.

“I don’t see how those could be on the same level as the casinos.”

“Obsessed people are guaranteed repeat customers and they’ll pay any amount for what they love, so don’t take it lightly.”

“I just can’t imagine it. And I know there’s a rule banning hotels in the casino district and putting them all on the other side of the island, but was that meant to make everything less concentrated on the casino side?”

Not counting the floating airport or harbor block, Goldmine Island only had a perimeter of five kilometers. The mountain was in the center and the coastal area was generally divided between the casino city and the mining city where the residents lived. The airport was on the casino side and the harbor was on the mining side. The abandoned buildings we mentioned before surrounded the mountain near its base.

“Here we are, sir. The Gold Crane, right?”

“Wow. This place is huge. Was it really handmade by craftsmen?”

“If the effort that went into this surprises you, you should learn more about the castles around Japan. On Goldmine Island, inns are the first-class place to stay, moored luxury cruise liners are second-class, and rented cruisers are third-class. You should thank your parents. This is gonna be a once-in-a-lifetime memory.”

Part 3 (Day 10/03 21:20 - 24:45)

I entered the inn, but there were no retro arcade games or ping pong tables.

I heard light footsteps rushing about and faint children’s laughter, but it wasn’t clear where any of it was coming from.

I was pretty certain the sounds did not come from anything human.

The hostess who greeted us looked a little surprised when she saw the Indoor Youkai.

“These are all Zashiki Warashi, aren’t they? They’re doing well for themselves. …It sounds like they might even have dozens of them living here.”

“These are Usuhiki Warashi, Kura Bokko, or Notabariko. They’re all subspecies of the Zashiki Warashi, but they aren’t on the same level as a legit Zashiki Warashi like me.”

“Hm?”

“The Zashiki Warashi is a well-known Youkai, so a lot of similar Youkai are lumped together in the same category. There may have only been one original version, but now they can be anything from a collection of babies killed during a famine to transformed Kappa or badgers who started living in the house.”

“I can’t help but see you as the odd or irregular version.”

The hostess led us down a long wood-floored hallway and to our room. Out of some strange sense of etiquette, the hostess mechanically reached for the sliding door, but I stopped her with a hand and threw the door open myself.

A hellish scene appeared before my eyes.

“Ah hyah hyah hyah hyah hyah hyah hyah hyah!! The worrrrrld is spiiiiiinning…”

“…”

My usual silent dad remained silent as my drunk mom spun him around and around and around. Nuts and dried squid were scattered on the table, the tatami mats, and everywhere else. Completely empty sake bottles had been left all over the place. I noticed the names Red Yukata and Black-Haired Beauty on the labels, so it seemed they were going through the junmai daiginjo they had brought themselves.

My mom kept her arms wrapped around my dad’s neck and her flushed face swayed back and forth.

“Nn… Oh, Shinobu? They already took dinner away, so you’ll have to go without.”

“Geh!?”

“Unlike a hotel, they bring you the food at a set time in Japanese inns. If you aren’t there, you miss out. Huh? Where are you going?”

“I can’t fill my stomach with the nuts and dried squid on the floor, so I have to go find something else to eat. …They’ll at least have a convenience store around here, right?”

“Don’t ask meee. I do think they had a shop near the entrance, though. A single rice ball was 2500 yen. And that’s a plain one. If you want a dried plum inside, the price more than doubles. That’s a tourist area for you.”

“Are you sure Intellectual Villages haven’t just suffered severe inflation?”

With that said, I left the room again. I thought I noticed my silent father give me a look begging me to save him, but I had enough filial piety to not get in their way.

“Why are you still with me, Good-for-Nothing Youkai?”

“You’re going to the casinos, aren’t you?”

I gave a large start.

“M-Miss Zashiki Warashi? How did you ever reach that conclusion?”

“You don’t seem too upset about missing dinner, so you must have something else in mind. You’re excited that you have an excuse to head out at night without rousing their suspicion. And what kind of entertainment do they have out here that you wouldn’t want your parents to know about?”

“Fine, fine. I won’t complain as long as you keep your mouth shut. But paranormal Youkai aren’t allowed in the casinos and they’ll definitely be on the lookout for a fortune-bringing Zashiki Warashi. What’s so fun about waiting outside the building?”

“What are you talking about? Seeing your bewildered expression when you lose every last yen is all the entertainment I need.”

“Just to be sure, you *are* a Zashiki Warashi, right?”

“Zashiki Warashi aren’t as harmless as children’s books make us out to be.” The Indoor Youkai shrugged. “But how much do you have in your wallet? And your card’s

credit limit isn't very high. I'm not sure you have enough for even one pull at the slots."

"I've already looked into it. They have a beginner's luck system that gives first-time guests thirty thousand yen in chips for free. The only condition is that you have to use all of the chips before leaving the casino. If you lose, you break even. If you win, the winnings go right into your wallet."

"So they give you a taste of gambling so you'll get addicted to it later?"

"Either way, we'll be leaving this island in two or three days. You can't just do this anywhere like with pachinko or horseracing, so I couldn't become an addict if I tried."

I took a peek in the inn's shop just to check, but I immediately grimaced and left. The canned drinks found in vending machines everywhere cost more than a thousand yen each, so this wasn't just the modern rural system where the luxurious ingredients drove up the price. The product was in no way worth what they were charging.

"What are we going to do about dinner?"

"If I win, we can have a luxurious meal with a bunny girl on the side. If I lose, we'll have to drink my tears. Do you feel like rooting for me now?"

A wooden sign set up near the inn's main entrance said, "Partnered with VR Casino City – Heavy Cruiser Island. Feel free to join us by PC, cellphone, or smartphone. – Goldmine Island Casino Promotion Committee"

"Didn't that taxi driver mention Heavy Cruiser Island?"

"Just like with Edo and Yamataikoku, it's a symbol of the 'good old days' people long for."

"But a virtual casino? What's so fun about playing what's really just a video game after coming all the way to a real casino island?"

"It seems you can buy points that can be used on the island. The units are Gears. They work with a monstrous point card system that over forty million people use and are accepted at major drugstores, video rental stores, and online stores, so you could easily call it a virtual currency."

"Wait a second, you good-for-nothing."

"But the app apparently gives out your location and it won't let you play if you aren't inside the island's special casino district, so it's still pretty frustrating."

"Why do you know so much about this? Don't tell me you've been gambling with my smartphone!"

No matter how much I questioned her, she only casually averted her gaze.

Dammit, I have to eventually get back that phone nestled between those giant breasts!

At any rate, we left the inn.

The sticky ink-like darkness of the rural night covered everything and I sighed as I looked around.

“Now for the first problem.”

“It looks like our only option is to walk to the casino district on the other side of the island. You can’t hire a taxi with that beginner’s luck system of yours, can you?”

“…”

Worried, I looked down at my cellphone.

When I saw the “28°” reading, I felt an unpleasant sweat pouring down my body.

Part 4 (Day 10/03 23:10 - 23:25)

It took wayyyy to long.

I had noticed it was surprisingly cool when I arrived on the island, but that had apparently been due to the breeze on that low-humidity night. As soon as I saw the digital temperature reading, I felt like the normal heat of the night suddenly returned.

And then I had to take a hellish marathon through that heat.

I was soaked with sweat and all the heat built up inside me almost made me want to die right then and there.

There was no way this could lead to my vision of dancing in gold coins as the king of the casino with a cocktail glass in one hand.

“This might be your punishment for trying to show off.”

“P-pant pant!! I-I didn’t do anything wrong!!”

It felt like midnight was fast approaching, but things were actually only just beginning in the casino city. The rush of fancy cars and women in gorgeous dresses showed no sign of stopping. I saw fireworks here and there, but it was apparently still too early for that to qualify as a late-night nuisance.

I frantically caught my breath and heard some suppressed giggling. I turned around to look and saw a small girl of about twelve or thirteen peering at me from between two buildings.

“What is that?”

“A Youkai, I think. Probably an Usuhiki Warashi, a version of a Zashiki Warashi like me.”

The girl had long hair and not only did she wear a short mini-yukata, but she let it slip far from her shoulders like a courtesan. It looked something like a tube-top style dress.

“Isn’t it sad, glamorous Indoor Youkai? She looks a lot more like an actual Zashiki Warashi than you.”

“Like I said, she’s only an Usuhiki Warashi. Don’t underestimate the real deal.”

When our eyes met, the Usuhiki Warashi let out a quick shriek and ran back into the alley. It looked less like she was afraid of the delinquent boy looking at her and more like she was teasing me.

Either way, it was no concern of mine.

“Shinobu, which casino are you going to use?”

“Any one that has a sign out front welcoming beginner’s luck people. I think that covers about half of them, though.”

As we spoke, a nearby casino door opened and a man dressed like a bartender seemed to chuck a few stuffed animals out onto the road. The softly bouncing creatures seemed to be a tanuki, a fox, and a badger. And they were not stuffed; they were real animals.

Isn’t this the group we saw out the taxi window earlier?

“You dumbasses!! How many times do we have to tell you!? No Youkai allowed! Go eat some soba and get to sleep, you morons!!”

“Shut up! We already told you we wouldn’t use our paranormal powers. We were playing cards fair and square. You’re just using this as an excuse because you started to lose!!”

The fox swung his hands (or front paws?) around as he protested, but the bartender man spat on the ground and returned to the casino.

The tanuki groaned while lying face up.

“Uuh… Th-this really is too much to ask for a wet nurse like me. How are we supposed to wing back the money that corrupt con artist stole?”

The badger got up so fast it looked like steam was going to come from his head. Oh, and while people often think badgers are the same as tanuki, they’re actually completely different animals.

“What!? Tanuki! Are you thinking of backing out after we finally managed to track down Kodama Ryou!? Then what will happen to the old lady and her granddaughter? Those two are in the hospital and need money for treatment. We have to get that lost money back!!”

Ohh…

I instinctually averted my gaze.

“Hey, Zashiki Warashi. I *really* don’t want to get involved in this.”

“But all three of them are looking this way. Being naturally loved by Youkai isn’t always fun, you know?”

Part 5 (Day 10/03 23:30 - 23:50)

We received a simple explanation on the street.

The three of them were apparently Youkai from Shikoku.

The fox was a gardener, the tanuki was a wet nurse, and the badger was a bodyguard and they had served a human family for generation after generation.

Youkai like this had a huge difference between the good and bad versions. There were gruesome stories about the bad ones killing an old lady who lived alone, taking over her life, and eating the rest of the villagers one by one.

City scholars claimed these stories had their roots in fears of “outsiders from the mountains”. Unlike in modern times, there had been no way to check fingerprints or DNA in the past. And with lax management of the family register, it had not been all that difficult to take the place of an elderly person who lived some distance from a village.

But how would that theory explain the animals walking on two legs in front of me?

“Our master belongs to a family with a long history, but they didn’t want to join the Intellectual Village system and ended up taken in by the advance of rural cities instead.”

“Oh, I think I see where this is going.”

“As you seem to have guessed, they failed to keep up with the changing times. Some might even say the family fell into ruin. They still live in the countryside, but their life is not that much different from a normal office worker.”

“But our loyalty hasn’t changed! You can’t judge someone’s worth based on the size of their savings!”

You really shouldn’t be saying that in a casino city.

They clearly had money troubles.

“So what’s this about a corrupt con artist?” asked the Zashiki Warashi with a shrug. “Not that I’ve ever heard of an honest con artist.”

“Kodama Ryou. He’s the old lady’s hated enemy! He used all sorts of underhanded methods and lies to make us think we could get the money we needed!!”

“What exactly was it?”

“A 100% guaranteed investment opportunity.”

I felt faint for a moment.

Are you seriously telling me it was the kind of scam people make over the phone?

“Laugh if you want,” muttered the wet nurse tanuki while puffing out her cheeks and stomach. “But the granddaughter had suddenly come down with a disease. And it’s a dangerous one that can’t be treated in Japan. The old lady’s pension wasn’t enough to pay for the travel and the surgery and then that man showed up with a smile on his face. What’s wrong with taking a chance when you’re desperate?”

I couldn’t help but give a heavy sigh.

The glamorous Zashiki Warashi crossed her arms in a way that pushed up her breasts and glanced over at me.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“How should I know? I’m only in high school and I’m not an expert when it comes to money.”

It was true I was human. The only others here were a fox, tanuki, badger, and Zashiki Warashi. As Youkai, none of them could enter the casino. I might have been able to confront this con artist named Kodama Ryou. But then what? What was an amateur student supposed to do against a professional trickster?

There was nothing I could do on my own.

Letting my emotions get the better of me would only end with me being taken for everything I was worth.

“But…”

I cut in there.

As the stuffed animal-like Youkai focused on me, I pulled out my cellphone.

“I have a *classmate* who’s ridiculously good with money. I’ll get some advice from her first.”

Part 6 (Day 10/04 00:00 - 00:20)

“I see what’s going on here, Shinobu-kun. If you see nothing wrong with calling me at this hour, I think you should go get yourself officially diagnosed with a Madoka-chan addiction.”

“You don’t sound like I woke you up, so I’m glad to see we’re both living equally unhealthy lifestyles.”

“Hm? I hear a lot of music in the background. Where are you right now?”

Eccentric beauty Kotemitsu Madoka’s question led me to glance at my surroundings.

Unlike the ridiculous deluge of light outside, the casino itself was moderately filled with soft lighting and music. The volume was a little high, but that may have been to hide the sounds of the roulettes and slot machines. With the red carpet, chic wooden pillars, and decorative green mats on the tables, it was a colorful place.

Despite being a tourist area, the men and women in suits and dresses were not crammed inside like the beach during summer. Leisurely comfort seemed to be the standard here.

I looked down from the second floor to view the poker tables on the first floor.

It covered his expensive suit, belt, and shoes, so it seemed this con artist really liked snakeskin. I just hoped his cocktail glass wasn’t filled with pit viper sake.

“You care a lot about money, Madoka-chan, so have you heard of a Kodama Ryou?”

“Oh…”

“Sounds like you have.”

“He’s a pretty big annoyance in the world of investment. For him, the stock market is a form of gambling, not a business. He buys or sells them with sums measured in the hundreds of millions just to enjoy the thrill. You can’t predict what he’s going to do, so a lot of people have had their stock certificates suddenly turned to scrap paper thanks to him.”

“What is he trying to do?”

“Weren’t you listening? He enjoys the thrill. Do you know his hobby? Art auctions. But after pouring ridiculous amounts of money into a painting or sculpture, he almost immediately donates it to a random museum. The act of acquiring it is what he enjoys. Nothing could be more troublesome.”

“So where does he get his money? If he’s doing that kind of thing all the time, even your average rich kid would run out pretty quickly.”

“Since you bothered to contact me, I assume you already know. He tricks people for fun and then uses the money he gets to enjoy that thrill he loves. And once his wallet is empty again, he starts looking for a new mark. …I said he donates the paintings and sculptures he gets to museums, remember? Thanks to that, every government feels like they owe him. The carefree government officials think of him as a necessary evil, so you can’t expect a proper investigation when he’s involved.”

“What’s this thrill nonsense? He’s made sure he’ll be safe no matter what.”

“But his techniques are stupidly simple. I doubt it, but your family didn’t fall for that, did they?”

“No, just some acquaintances. An old woman in Shikoku fell for it when she was trying to find the money to save her sick granddaughter. Do you think that story’s true?”

“There’s too little information, so I can’t say. But Kodama Ryou has scammed about two thousand people around the country and that’s only the ones I can confirm. Whether that particular story is true or not, he’s probably done something similar. That sick granddaughter sounds like exactly the kind of thing he would use.”

“What?”

“Why do you think everyone falls for it when his speaking skills are no better than an ape’s? I don’t know how, but he always shows up right when a family member has been in a traffic accident or had their house burn down. He targets people when they aren’t thinking straight. My guess is whatever put them in that state was his doing, too. …Could this granddaughter’s disease be reproduced by ingesting some kind of harmful substance?”

……
……

I looked back down over the railing and at the first floor poker table.

The lady killer decked out in snakeskin was getting drunk on expensive drink while toying with the cards he was dealt.

As he smiled in the light, I could not see a single stain on him. There was not even a drop of the blood he sucked from his victims.

“Um, Shinobu-kun. If you really do need money, I can help you out. I can get about two billion moving with a single phone call to my accountant.”

“How much of a debt do you want a classmate to owe you? Now you’re just scaring me. And that would be too boring. It wouldn’t feel like actually winning.”

“?”

Yes. For example, winning a ton of money against a computer program in the Heavy Cruiser Island VR casino city using a cellphone or smartphone wouldn’t help cheer me up.

“It has to be from that bastard.”

I extended the thumb and forefinger of my empty hand to make a handgun gesture.

And I thrust it directly toward the face of that snake man who was enjoying his time surrounded by beautiful women.

“I won’t be satisfied unless I take back everything he’s taken and add some interest on top for good measure.”

Part 7 (Day 10/04 00:35 - 01:15)

I got my chip worth thirty thousand yen with the beginner’s luck system and sat at a poker table. It seemed the tables were divided into a few different categories based on how much you could bet at once and I was only allowed at the cheapest table on the far edge of the room.

But even there, I lost almost everything.

The female dealer gave me a sympathetic look as I left the table and then exited the casino.

“Rejoice, my thirty thousand yen chip transformed into one thousand five hundred yen. That’s thanks to getting two of a kind twice. Now I should be able to buy some dinner once I find a normal convenience store somewhere around here.”

“Shinobu, I think the dealer intentionally gave you those hands to draw you in.”

“I also figured out why the VR casino’s virtual currency is called Gears. The chip designs have a gear motif and it seems you can exchange chips between physical and virtual.”

Annoyance filled my tone as I started recalling my observations of the enemy.

“That place is pretty amazing. I’m guessing it’s to keep people from cheating by marking the cards, but they throw them all out after every hand and open the seal on a brand new deck.”

Just like normal animals, the fox, tanuki, and badger were rummaging through a trash can behind the casino.

“Look, they threw out this meat on the bone almost untouched! I can’t imagine why anyone would do this!!”

“They probably confused throwing out perfectly edible food with luxury.”

“Damn them. This is the kind of person that took the old lady’s precious pension money!?”

As they argued back and forth, they began chowing down like they were at a house party. I was just glad they looked so happy.

She must have decided they weren’t going to be any use because the Indoor Zashiki Warashi didn’t even look their way as she spoke to me.

“So what are you going to do? You have to challenge this Kodama Ryou guy to a game of poker to get back the money he stole, right? But I think you need some funds of your own to do that.”

“Yeah, it was no use. With a thirty thousand yen chip, I couldn’t even sit at the same table as him. The minimum was three million. I could blow three million on a single hand. And that could easily double or quadruple if someone raises the bet. There’s no way I can find that kind of money.”

The Zashiki Warashi glanced over at the road and the hands of the men and women slowly stepping out of black limousines.

“It doesn’t look to be like the casino guests are carrying around duralumin cases or anything.”

“I’m not going to steal it, you idiot. And they probably think carry cash is for poor people. They all pay with cards. You’ve heard of a black card, haven’t you? Those have no credit limit. The casinos all have giant servers in the back, so the VIPs always have access to the card companies. To them, it’s really only data moving back and forth.”

“And your card is?”

“You already know that. It’s just meant to make online shopping easier. Paying for my cellphone, cable TV, smartphone, computer, and online gaming is enough to almost hit the limit. I don’t have any leeway there.”

The fox walked out from behind the casino holding a bunch of French fries and began shouting as if he could not overlook what I had said.

“What!? Then what are we going to do? We’ve already hit a dead end before the game has even begun!!”

“That’s right. But anyone in an Intellectual Village casino is going to have odd tastes, so there will be plenty of people who know what things are worth. …I don’t need actual money. I just need something they’ll be even more eager to get their hands on.”

“Shinobu, you don’t mean…”

“Red Yukata and Black-Haired Beauty.”

The three animals only tilted their heads at those brand names, so I explained.

“That junmai daiginjo is worth fifty thousand yen a cup, so what if I knew where bottles of it were just lying around?”

Part 8 (Day 10/04 02:05 - 02:30)

Simply travelling between the casino and inn was exhausting.

The Zashiki Warashi and I gathered the empty bottles lying around our room in the inn and filled them with tap water. My parents were completely drunk, so it wasn’t difficult.

“W-will that really fool them?”

The wet nurse tanuki was clearly nervous when we got back, but there was really no need to worry about it.

“The bottles and labels are definitely from the Jinnai Brewery and they’ll know I really am the son of the family if they check my identity.”

“But that’s only water in there, right?”

“No one can open the bottles. The scarcity is everything with brand-name sake. You’ve essentially ruined it as soon as you open it, so they can’t carelessly appraise it or anything. No one would be delighted to eat the leftovers of someone’s fancy dinner, right? Well, this is the same. …As long as I don’t lose, no one’s going to check on the contents. And this many bottles should count for about seven million yen.”

“B-but what if they do a careful examination of the cork.”

“Don’t worry. One unique trait of the Jinnai Brewery is the lack of a decorative label over the cork. The idea is that avoids dirtying the mouth of the bottle with adhesive. The clasp over the cork is used to tell if it’s been opened or not, but you can bend that with a coin. They won’t be able to tell as long as they don’t check with a jeweler’s magnifying glass.”

The fox and badger were discussing our strategy a short distance away.

“What are we going to do?”

“Kodama Ryou is a con artist, so there’s no need for us to play fair either.”

The Zashiki Warashi tapped her shoulder with a huge sake bottle.

“But pulling this off only gets you at the same table as him. He’s managed to stay at that high-stakes table for who knows how long, so he has to be cheating somehow.”

“W-we’ve heard something about that.” The tanuki raised one paw while standing on her hind legs. “We heard it from a gentleman who lost everything to him. He claimed Kodama Ryou uses an Usuhiki Warashi and that he wouldn’t have lost if he could have found some proof. The man was pretty drunk, though.”

“An Usuhiki Warashi, you say?”

A troubled look filled my face.

Hadn’t I heard giggling from between two buildings and seen a Youkai that looked like a small girl?

An Usuhiki Warashi was a subspecies of Zashiki Warashi that would appear near the stone mill in old houses. Other than that trait, they were almost identical to a Zashiki Warashi. They brought wealth and fortune to the family of the house they lived in, but that house would fall into decline as soon as they left. According to the records, they would predict fires or lead to an entire clan being wiped out in a single night.

The only other major trait was the frequent non-malicious pranks. In those cases, it apparently wasn’t unusual for them to leave the home or stone mill they saw as their territory. For example, when children were playing in the house’s yard or in the schoolyard, an extra child would mysteriously appear among them. It was obvious an Usuhiki Warashi had joined in because the adults would find the number of children had increased when they counted them, but they could never figure out which one was the Usuhiki Warashi. They would also sneak into the family’s futon as they slept, flip over their pillows, pull away the blanket, or play other pranks around the bed.

The legit Good-for-Nothing Zashiki Warashi tilted her head.

“But I thought Youkai weren’t allowed in the casinos. If this Kodama con artist is using one of my subspecies, wouldn’t he be caught almost immediately?”

“Yes, but there were some suspicious-looking people among the casino security guards.”

Intellectual Villages didn’t trust the police much, so armed guards weren’t an uncommon sight. They were armed with weapons that didn’t run afoul of the Swords and Firearms Control Law. For example, a small crossbow or a blackjack made by stuffing small metal balls into a leather bag. They would use those weapons to beat up dangerous animals, crop thieves, or industrial spies.

But this was a casino city.

The guards here seemed even more heavily armed than the normal guards who surrounded eccentric beauty Madoka-chan. Some were even equipped with the kind of mechanical arm used for medical or engineering purposes that increased a human’s strength five or ten times over.

I definitely didn’t want to make an enemy of them, but some stood out even more than the others.

“They had pentagram-like marks on the backs of their gloves and they felt like a mix of a charismatic spiritual leader and a hitman.”

“Mh? That sounds like an Onmyouji to me! I know all about them. If they’re using a pentagram, they must follow the Abe style!! Maybe they’re sarcastic intellectuals who curry the favor of the Imperial Court and the nobles to live the good life!!”

The badger flailed his short arms and legs around while shouting, but…

“Hey, what do you think?” I asked the Zashiki Warashi. “Is it really likely that they have an anti-Youkai unit that specializes in the paranormal?”

“Who can say? They’re probably about the same as a girl with an affinity for the spiritual. They can probably sense that something’s wrong, but I doubt they have the power needed to directly kill a Youkai. If people like that were so easy to get your hands on, the country would have made up for the gaps in its laws by now. Not to mention that those kinds of people belong to organizations that don’t like to make public appearances.”

She was referring to the world centered on Hyakki Yakou.

Seeing people like Hishigami Mai or the Illness Magic User made it easy to forget how hard it was to kill a Youkai, but people like that were few and far between. You couldn’t just hand them some cash and have them guard your casino like a part-timer.

“But this is probably enough to catch anyone cheating. It’s always the humans who use Packages, so they can use their numbers and physical strength to put a stop to it when they sense that something’s wrong.”

“B-but Kodama Ryou is using an Usuhiki Warashi to cheat right now,” pointed out the wet nurse tanuki.

“It’s simple,” I answered with a shrug. “He’s probably bribed them.”

The three animals groaned.

“That would explain why they found us so easily when we snuck in. He must have ordered them to focus on searching for anyone who might harm him.”

I have no idea what method you used, but something tells me that was your own fault.

“Anyway, we’ll have to reveal his Usuhiki Warashi trick on our own. We can’t expect the casino to do anything about it.”

“D-do you have a plan? I really don’t think you can win by leaving it up to luck.”

“I wouldn’t even try if that’s what I was doing.” I gathered up the sake battles filled with tap water. “Zashiki Warashi, give those three the smartphone you borrowed from me. It’s necessary.”

“?”

“Also, you three won’t be going with us. There’s a lot I want you to do instead.”

I rattled off my instructions.

After telling the Zashiki Warashi what she had to do, I turned toward the fox, tanuki, and badger who had started swiping their front paws across the screen to see how it worked.

“And I will of course need your help for this.”

“We will do anything to help the old lady, but we can’t even get inside the casino.”

The badger tilted his head as he spoke, so I replied.

“Not all help has to come from inside the casino.”

Part 9 (Day 10/04 02:41 - 03:00)

If the joker is included in the deck, one of the players must announce it. The announcer’s winnings for that hand will only be 0.8 times normal (with the exception of five of a kind that can only be made with a joker).

If the winner forms their hand after discarding the joker, their winnings will be twice normal.

If a player is caught cheating, they will be penalized twice their bet amount. However, a simple bluff does not qualify as cheating.

Cheating is eliminated by the thorough management of the dealer, but it can also be directly pointed out by an opponent.

But if the loser accuses the winner of cheating and no cheating can be proven, the loser will be penalized one hundred times their bet amount for ruining the game and damaging the winner’s reputation.

If a player does not swap out a single card, their winnings will be 1.5 times normal.

I went over the local rules in my head as I once more threw open the door to the casino that took away almost all of the thirty thousand yen chip I got from the beginner’s luck system. A few people looked down on me as the guest who did not belong yet returned anyway, but I that didn’t matter.

I had only one target: the top-rate poker table that Kodama Ryou still sat at.

“Hi there!”

Just as the dealer was about to deal the cards to the con artist and four other ladies and gentlemen, I called out to them.

I also shoved aside the middle-aged man sitting next to Kodama Ryou, knocking over the cards and chips in the process.

“You… Ha ha. Yeah, you! …You’re Kodama-san, aren’t you? Kodama Ryou! They had a championship to determine the best player in Japan’s four greatest casinos, but why didn’t you join in? That was just child’s play, so if you’d shown up, you could’ve changed history.”

“Hey!” shouted the angry middle-aged man.

Some men in black were positioned by the walls and columns so they could keep a view of the entire floor yet not interrupt the flow of guests. They all began rushing toward me, but not because they thought I was a threat. They probably thought I was here to complain about my previous loss.

They grabbed the back of my neck and my arms, but I still laughed.

“You’re like my hero, so I want to steal your unbeatable secrets with my eyes! I’m not asking to be your apprentice or anything like that, so will you play against me just once. I brought the money I need to bet on it, so can’t you just play one game!?”

The snakeskin con artist slowly closed his eyes.

Eventually, he opened them ever so slightly.

What was he thinking? What was he weighing on the scales?

“Well…”

He made extra sure his voice lacked any kind of displeased distortion like a skipping record.

That was all it took for the men in black’s grip to weaken on my arms.

“Before we talk, could I treat everyone at the table to a drink? I have to do at least that much if we’re robbing them of a game.”

“Oh, yeah. Um, sorry!”

“What do you say, everyone? Will you leave this to me and take a drink to this young man’s future?”

They accepted the con artist’s request with bitter sneers more than with displeasure.

Yes, that’s right.

This is perfect.

I had destroyed a game where money changed hands by the millions and Kodama Ryou was the undefeated player at the table. The gallery had to be hoping he would drown this impolite brat in a hell of debt. Pushed on by that, Kodama Ryou had to be thinking he would “kindly” give me what I wanted and take everything I had to make up for the game I had robbed him.

If he wasn’t willing to ruin a stupid kid’s life for money, he wouldn’t work as a con artist.

But had he realized that the stage was set? There were no brakes on this roller coaster. Once the drop began, he couldn’t back out no matter how ridiculous it got.

If a casino’s top player backed out of a game suggested by a stupid-looking high school boy, he’d be seen as the biggest chicken of them all.

There had to be a type of reputation and trust he wanted to earn even if it meant deceiving everyone.

He needed it to keep the money flowing in from his victims.

“So what do you mean when you say you brought the money you need to bet on the game? I doubt a kid your age has what it takes to sit at this table.”

“Heh. Heh heh. I’m not really sure if I can use it or not.”

With a stiff smile, I clunked my “funds” up onto the table.

“But I’ve got Red Yukata, Black-Haired Beauty, Lovely Nape, and Gorgeous White Hand. I don’t really get it myself, but these are my grampa’s treasure. Is this enough for a game?”

“Oh? The Jinnai Brewery?”

The snakeskin man actually sounded a little surprised at this.

The name was pretty well known, so a stir ran through the ladies and gentlemen in the gallery as well.

“Well, well. You don’t see this every day, but it’s still not quite enough.”

Liar.

I know this is easily enough for two or three games (if they weren’t filled with tap water, of course). You just want to rip off a kid who doesn’t know what it’s worth, don’t you?

“So how about this? Why not play a special game just between the two of us? Let’s keep the dealer and the casino out of this. You want to steal my techniques, so including the other players would only get in the way, wouldn’t it?”

“Y-you’ll do that much for me!?”

That means you don’t have to worry about the other players or the dealer stealing your winnings, doesn’t it?

“Yes, yes. How much do you know about poker?”

“Th-the basics. I’ve played it with some friends in my class. Y’know, you shuffle the cards, deal out five each, and then exchange however many you want.”

“Ha ha. Then I guess you wouldn’t know what Texas Hold ‘em is. Well, we can play the Japanese card game style with five cards each. We’ll exchange cards…”

He snapped his fingers, someone tossed a die over from another table, and he rolled it.

“Okay, we’ll exchange them twice. Is that fine?”

“But then it won’t feel like a real casino game after I came all the way to Goldmine Island. …Oh, I know. Can we use the casino’s rate and local rules?”

“Fine. What should we do about a five of a kind using a joker?”

“Doesn’t matter to me.”

“Then let’s allow it. That makes 53 cards including the joker. Today’s lucky sort is…”

He swung his hand and the dealer spread the cards out on the table face-down before pulling one out.

“Okay, the seven of spades. In this game, a royal flush of spades will be a special hand and the only one that can defeat a five of a kind.”

“Also, I want to see how you use the cards, so can we do away with the raising and calling? Let’s risk it all from the beginning. I won’t get anything by seeing how you fold.”

“Fine. I’ll give you what you want here since it should be an important lesson for you.”

He must have wanted to show how generous he was or to draw in the gallery because he accepted my suggestions surprisingly readily.

“I’m actually pretty happy about this,” he said. “A lot happened on my way to where I am and I even had someone I viewed as a teacher. Seeing you here kind of makes me think I’ve finally arrived where he was. *So…*”

He smiled thinly and snapped his fingers.

Immediately, the front double-doors opened and several men in black stomped inside.

They were holding something from either side.

“That Zashiki Warashi is your Youkai, isn’t it?”

I could feel unpleasant sweat seeping out on the back of my neck.

The Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata was bound by what looked like white plastic rope. And not just her arms and legs either. It was wrapped around her torso, her neck, and all of her body like some kind of sick form of torture.

Still smiling, the con artist spoke.

“You see, the casino knows how to take care of Youkai related to fortunes and money.”

He spoke quickly.

The Youkai that should have been invulnerable to blades or bullets was giving me a pleading look.

“They say Zashiki Warashi come from the threshold, below the floor, or below the stone mill. Those seem to have been common places to bury murdered babies. Using that legend, they crush an old stone mill into powder, place it in a furnace, and create glass fiber rope out of it. Not even the Youkai’s great strength can break it.”

“…”

“This! This is how it has to be, boy!”

Kodama Ryou’s raised voice seemed to swallow me up.

It seemed to create a current that swept me away without letting me make any kind of protest.

“If you want to feel the true thrill of a gamble, you must follow a few simple rules of etiquette. First, do not keep any assets in reserve. And second, do not keep any tricks up your sleeve. …How about you bet that Youkai as well? If you don’t, you won’t get any closer to the true essence of gambling.”

“……”

“Now, let’s do as you said and risk it all from the beginning. No raising, no calling, and no wisely folding. Surely you don’t mind. You were the one asking for just that.”

For a moment, truly just a moment, the inside of my forehead felt oddly cold and I felt like I was going to forget everything. I had known this was coming, but my vision still nearly filled with white light.

Yes, I had known this was coming.

In other words…

Yes, yes! I was waiting for this!!

When speaking with Madoka over the phone, she had pointed out the initial problem I would face.

“Shinobu-kun, do you really think an expert cheater will really agree to such an odd game? Con artists tend to be bold but cowardly. They’ll get caught otherwise. And a professional is definitely going to be better at trickery than a high school boy. If you smile with school play level acting skills, he’s going to immediately suspect something is up.”

“Then we can let him figure it out. I just have to set it up so things can continue even if he does.”

I thought back to that strategy meeting and I had to work hard not to let it show on my face.

Kodama Ryou knew how to capture and control a Zashiki Warashi. Even if he had seen through my bluff with the sake bottles, he still wanted to continue the game to get his hands on the Youkai. That was why he had paid less attention to the change from the casino’s usual Texas Hold ‘em rules and the number of card exchanges.

For him, anything was fine as long as he didn’t win so much it was obvious he was cheating. Normal poker only exchanged cards just once, but if he kept getting royal flushes and five of a kinds, people would think he was a little too “lucky”. So as long as it was higher than one, the number could have been three or six for all he cared. That was all he was focusing on.

And that settled it for me.

He really was reliant on the Zashiki Warashi subspecies known as an Usuhiki Warashi. It wasn’t that he had mastered his sleight of hand to godlike levels and then taken one step further to get the help of an Usuhiki Warashi. If you took the Youkai from him, he had nothing left.

The men in black were threatening us with the glass fiber rope made from a stone mill, but that was likely all they had. They weren’t monsters like Hyakki Yakou that could slaughter any Youkai that opposed them. They had built up their foundation around the Usuhiki Warashi and could only deal with that one type of paranormal.

That meant I didn’t need to worry about any other method.

If I could break through the Usuhiki Warashi system, they would fall into the abyss!

“I! Didn’t! Hear! Anything! About! This!”

I noticed the Zashiki Warashi was mouthing protests with even her breasts and crotch tightly and seductively bound.

Well, that’s because I didn’t tell you.

“I! Just! Have! To! Win!”

“Only! Losers! Think! That! Way!”

Heh heh. Truth was, that lazy and glamorous Youkai had given me plenty of reason to resent her. Earlier she had used my smartphone to download the avatar management app used to enter the VR Casino City named Heavy Cruiser Island, so she could have easily bankrupted me. It only seemed right to add on the local rules and keep at it until she was in a sexy predicament. This was a game of chicken!

“Are you done talking it out?” asked Kodama Ryou with some low laughter.

He of course seemed to have some kind of network set up around the casino, but he had let his guard down and assumed the Zashiki Warashi was all I had. When faced with a chance to get a Zashiki Warashi which he could use to cheat and which was more powerful than his Usuhiki Warashi, he had overlooked the other three.

That’s right. The fox, tanuki, and badger.

“Fine! Fine!! …I’m still gonna make a name for myself. I swear… I swear to you I’ll steal your techniques!!”

“You! Had! Better! Remember! This!”

Part 10 (Day 10/04 03:00 - 03:09)

It was a one-on-one game, but we still used a fresh pack of the casino’s cards and the dealer still dealt them to us. Kodama Ryou had suggested it as a way to make things more exciting, but it likely had more to do with his confidence in his means of cheating with an Usuhiki Warashi and the fact that he didn’t want to touch the deck himself and allow people to claim he was cheating that way.

Five cards had already been dealt to me and the dealer slid just as many to Kodama Ryou.

This was my second time in the casino.

The first time I had watched from the second floor as he won multiple games in a row.

“Wow, he’s really winning. But the dealer is handling all the cards and it doesn’t look like he’s doing something as cheap as swapping out cards with identical ones up his sleeve. I don’t see any chance for him to be doing any kind of sleight of hand.”

“Then has he bribed the dealer?” Madoka had asked.

“I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“You can’t see the dealer’s face over the phone, but it’s pale as can be. He looks about to cry. The more Kodama Ryou wins, the more people will suspect the dealer, so I can’t blame him.”

“Then what is it?”

“If he’s using a Youkai’s occult power, it isn’t as simple as seeing his opponent’s cards. He isn’t the type to win by folding at the optimal time. He enjoys building up a powerful hand.”

“Then can he create the cards he needs like a fox or tanuki turning leaves into coins?”

“Or he can freely swap out all of the cards.”

Later, the fox, tanuki, and badger had told me Kodama Ryou was cheating using an Usuhiki Warashi which was a symbol of fortune.

There were no legends about the Usuhiki Warashi “counterfeiting” coins out of leaves.

That Youkai more generally brought fortune and prosperity to the house it lived in, but that was too vague.

That could not have been what he was using.

However, there were stories about the pranks pulled by the Usuhiki Warashi and the Zashiki Warashi. For example, when the children were playing in the yard, an extra one would appear it at some point. The adults could tell there was an extra child by counting them, but they could not tell which one was actually a Youkai.

Is this a Package that mixes in new cards without anyone noticing?

I briefly entertained that idea but then rejected it.

That was only a momentary misunderstanding. Even if a Zashiki Warashi could slip in amongst the children playing in the schoolyard during recess, it could not fully blend in as a classmate. It would eventually be found out and eventually vanish. In a casino where cheating meant instant death, I doubted he would use that trait “as is”.

Which meant…

It isn’t that powerful. It’s a method of mixing in the cards without changing the number.

Their other pranks were sneaking into the futon that someone was sleeping in, flipping over the pillow, and pulling on the blanket, so they all had to do with the bed.

While they could move the pillow or blanket, they could not hide them anywhere. Nor did the sleeper go missing or lose their life.

The Zashiki Warashi was a Youkai that could move a pillow or blanket without changing the “number” and not even their owner could do anything to stop it.

In other words…

He isn’t actually increasing or decreasing the number of cards. He ignores the laws of physics to pull out whatever cards he needs to win and slips them into his own hand. This Package lets him freely swap out the cards.

In that case, he would have complete control over all fifty-three cards, but he wouldn’t be able to directly influence the cards that either I or the impartial dealer could see. If the card changed while we were looking, it would cause a panic.

He himself could only see the five cards in his own hand, so that was risky. He wouldn't know where the cards he wanted were, so there was a danger of swapping out his opponent's card while they were looking.

He had to have a safety.

He didn't know where the cards were, but if it was being observed by someone, the card wouldn't come to him even if he wanted it.

But other than that, he could get his hands on any of the cards.

He could build his hand from the five he was dealt and any of the cards in the face-down deck the dealer held. He could create as many royal flushes and five of a kinds as he wanted. There was no way to get a fair game out of this.

But…

"Three of diamonds, nine of hearts, three of clubs, jack of hearts, and queen of hearts."

The atmosphere immediately froze over.

All I had done was give a casual comment with my cards fanned out, but it silenced even the gallery who were ready to taste the sweet nectar of schadenfreude.

"What?" asked Kodama Ryou while blinking in confusion.

"It's a jinx for good luck. …You said this needs to be a real battle, right? Well, I want to really corner myself here. I want to see what I find if I keep going, so I set myself up. Have I approached your realm now?"

"Well, um, that's not really what-… Listen. When I rolled the die earlier, we decided to allow two card exchanges, remember? And yet you…"

"Ha ha! That would be too boring!!"

I was clearly bad at this, but anyone could tell I was looking down on him.

"Okay, I revealed everything, so what are your cards?"

"Do you really think I need to tell you? I am going to play normally and-…"

"Oh, so you're backing down?"

I cut him off.

If I'd used this tone of voice with an upperclassman at school, I could hardly have complained if they punched me.

"No, no. Don't worry about it. It makes sense. I was the one that chose to reveal my cards, so you do your best with your method. That's what I want to learn from, after all. You hunch forward, carefully hide your cards from view, and win that way."

"Ah?"

“I’m saying not to worry about it. You know this is a serious match too, right? So who knows who’ll win. It’s entirely possible you’ll lose everything to the amateur kid and break down crying. If you’d rather hunch over like that to avoid the possibility of having an embarrassing cellphone photo spread around the world, then that’s just how you want to live your life. You can do this at your own pace, teacher.”

I heard a quiet wave of laughter and remembered what Madoka had said.

“Con artists will do whatever they can to nonchalantly escape any disadvantageous situation, but it might be surprisingly easy to get him caught with no way to escape.”

“Eh? Why? What do you mean?”

“Think about it. Even if he’s surrounded by his supporters, how many do you think are actually rooting for him from the bottom of their hearts? The place has to be filled with people whose smiles hide a desire to see him pathetically crawling on the ground. A champion who always wins is boring. Anyone hanging around a casino to see others ascend to heaven or be cast into hell will want to see a hard-fought battle, not a stable victory.”

I could not help but remember that comment.

I was in enough of a trance to ignore the game before my eyes and lose myself in the past.

Kodama’s eyes rolled around to secretly view the passionate and sneering gallery.

“When did you get them on your side?” he asked.

“What are you talking about? I’m only looking at you right now.”

For some reason, my direct response received a mouthed protest from the turtle shell bondage Indoor Youkai instead of from the con artist.

Ahh, a wonderful view no matter where I look. I’m in such a good mood!!

This game had begun as a chance for the top player to crush a conceited brat and the gallery had wanted to see me suffer.

However, people’s hearts changed easily.

They would soon realize whose defeat would be more exciting and enjoyable.

Kodama Ryou clenched his teeth and threw his cards face-up on the poker table.

“Queen of diamonds, king of diamonds, king of clubs, six of spades, and king of hearts!”

“Oh? You were dealt a three of a kind? Swap out one and you could get four of a kind or a full house. Swap out two and you could even get five of a kind. I would expect no less of you, Kodama-san. You didn’t need to hide that at all.”

But this would prevent him from swapping out the five cards in his hand.

The only cards he could use his Usuhiki Warashi Package on were the ones in the dealer’s deck.

And his biggest chance was coming.

“Then let’s get on to the first exchange.”

He made that overly dramatic statement as if challenging me or trying to overturn the atmosphere that was threatening to envelop him.

His voice dropped almost to a whisper.

“If I win here, I will take everything from you: your money and that Youkai. …Don’t forget that. I’ll give you a nice lesson, but this is still a legit game played in a casino.”

…

Don’t let him draw you in. Don’t let him.

Don’t look down at the bottom of the cliff. Remembering the risk is meaningless.

Shrug and laugh it off! Laugh and keep moving!!

“Ha…ha ha. Don’t try anything too blatant like exchanging all five cards and just so happening to get a royal flush. I think the dealer might stab you if you did.”

I gave one last warning.

He remained smiling, but now exchanging all five cards would be suicide. He would almost certainly be accused of cheating.

Which meant…

If he has any sense, he’ll remove the queen of diamonds and six of spades and give himself a king of spades and a joker for a five of a kind with the four kings and a joker. The only way I can hope to match that is with a royal flush of spades, but that will be impossible if he has the king of spades. And unlike with other hands, he doesn’t have to worry about me getting a five of a kind with a higher number. After all, you need a joker for five of a kind and there’s only one of those in the deck.

When planning with Madoka, we had obviously not been able to predict what cards we would get, so I had to make up the rest on the fly.

The protection of money goddess Kotemitsu Madoka-chan had just about run out.

Figuring out the rules behind Kodama Ryou’s cheating was fine, but that alone wasn’t enough. No matter how much we planned and prepared, I still ultimately had to defeat him on my own.

Kotemitsu Madoka’s plan and the help of the Zashiki Warashi and the fox, tanuki, and badger waiting outside would be of no help unless I overcame this.

If I lost, I would sink and all would be lost.

Slowly, I took a deep breath and spoke.

“Then two. The three of diamonds and three of clubs.”

“Ha ha!!”

The snakeskin guy laughed loudly and even clapped his hands.

“C’mon, now. I already have three kings, so why are you getting rid of your two of a kind? That’s just going to leave you with nothing. Or do you think you’re giving yourself a handicap? Or maybe you’re trying to provoke me?”

“This is fine. Two threes would too boring.”

“That leaves you with…oh. The nine of hearts, jack of hearts, and queen of hearts. Which means… Ha ha! Don’t tell me you’re trying to get the ten and king of hearts for a royal flush or maybe the eight and ten for a straight flush! That’s getting a little too greedy!!”

I didn’t really think I could get that.

After all, he could freely control the remaining cards in the deck.

And sure enough, the two cards I was dealt were…

“What, you’re not going to go out of the way to announce these ones? Ha ha. Of course not!! You threw away your two of a kind and got nothing in return. Besides, that hand is only so valuable because it’s so hard to get.”

“Enough nastiness. Just keep playing.”

“Fine then. I’ll take two as well and get rid of the queen of diamonds and six of spades. Yes, that’s the standard course of action.”

That meant he really was after a five of a kind using the four kings and the joker. Not even a royal flush of hearts could beat that.

I could feel my heart racing even faster.

Was this really the way to go?

Had there been something else I could have done?

Doubts bubbled up inside my head, but the mine cart had already started rolling down the hill. There was no taking back the life placed inside it. I could only bet on this. I could only keep charging forward!

But there was a fork in the mine cart’s track.

If he completed his five of a kind during this first card exchange, I was done for.

But if he gathered one card at a time to complete it on the second exchange, I still had a way out, even if just barely.

Which would it be?

Which way would it roll?

“Kee hee.”

I heard laughter.

The ominous sound of teeth scraping together hurt my ears.

“Kee hee hee. Hee hee hee

I didn’t need to keep grinning like an idiot and speaking more politely than I was used to.

I completely changed my tone of voice.

Had he been confronted with so many unusual things that he had wanted a little bit of stability?

Or had his ability to control the cards I was dealt caused him to let his guard down? Deciding the number of card exchanges with a roll of a die had likely been “insurance” against doubts if he won too brilliantly after only the one exchange.

Either way, it was now my turn to go on the offensive!

“*After all, I have the king of spades. I exchanged my cards first, so it makes no sense for you to have the king of spades in your hand.*”

“What..?”

“Oh, c’mon. Why do you look so surprised? *With a look like that, you would almost think you had known from the beginning what cards we would be getting.*”

Kodama Ryou seemed to focus more on what I said than on my tone of voice or my attitude.

He seemed to be saying he had seen through my farce and that no one cared about that.

“Don’t make baseless accusations!! There’s only one king of spades and it’s in my hand, so you couldn’t possibly have it. Anyone could tell you that!”

“Fine then. How about we both show our hands at the same time?”

I waved my fanned-out cards toward him while making my suggestion and looking down on him.

“But what will happen then?”

“What do you mean?”

“What will happen to the game if the king of spades shows up in both of our hands? By the way, do you remember my hand? I’m going for a royal flush or straight flush of hearts, so the king of spades wouldn’t help me in the slightest. I have no reason to cheat and slip one into my hand.”

“…”

“But what about you? Oh, well I guess that goes without saying. You’re after a five of a kind using the four kings and the joker. You’re obviously the one who benefits from having the king of spades in his hand.”

I slammed one hand down on the poker table as I threatened him.

Yes, and I slammed my five cards down as I did so.

“So what will you do? Are you going to call this game off to see if one of us has been cheating?”

“…!!!!!!”

Most likely, quite a few things were spinning through Kodama Ryou’s head.

Had something gone wrong with his Usuhiki Warashi card-swapping Package?

Had an amateur high school boy slipped in a card he was hiding up his sleeve?

Was there only the one king of spades and I was only bluffing?

But he had a way of secretly checking on the truth.

Yes.

I had slammed my cards face-down on the table, so no one could see them.

That meant he could swap them out with his Usuhiki Warashi Package. By swapping out my cards and his cards, he could quickly determine whether I was bluffing or not.

But would he really take the bait?

He was sure to remember which two cards were the ones I had been dealt. By swapping them with two in his hand, he could determine whether I had a king of spades or not.

But that would mean getting rid of his nearly-completed five of a kind. He could swap out cards but not increase or decrease their number, so he had to break up his hand to use that paranormal power.

He had one unneeded card still, but to be absolutely sure, he would have to swap out two. Either way, he would lose one of the cards he needed.

What would he do?

What would happen?

What would the snakeskin con artist choose?

“You got me.”

Kodama Ryou casually shrugged.

“I give up. I lied to shake you up a bit, but I never thought you had the actual card.”

“…!?”

It can’t be!!

I quickly checked the cards I had placed face-down on the table.

He had made the switch.

One of the five had transformed into an unfamiliar king of spades!

“Now that we’ve established you have the king of spades, can we get on with the game?”

He threw away his five of a kind?

Is he going for four of a kind with the joker now!?

And as I had explained myself, the king of spades was only a hindrance for me since I was going for one or the other of the highest two straight flushes of hearts.

He had worked through my accusation and stayed on the path to a powerful hand while also crushing my own possibilities.

And since I had said myself that I had the king of spades, I had no choice but to accept this unwanted gift.

“Now that we’re back on track, it’s time for the second card exchange.”

Kodama Ryou grinned like he was already imagining himself playing his four of a kind against my worthless hand.

This would end with the next exchange.

I could not fold here, so it would all be over soon.

“As before, you can go first.”

Part 11 (Day 10/04 03:09 - 03:20)

The Usuhiki Warashi Package allowed one to freely swap out any of the fifty-three cards on the table.

However, they would notice something was wrong if they tried to swap out a card being viewed by their opponent or a third party. That meant they could only use any face-down cards or the five in their own hand.

They did not know where any card was on the table until they used the Package.

Just by thinking about the card they wanted, the card would be automatically brought to the user’s hand. They could also force an unwanted card onto their opponent.

If the card happened to be viewed by their opponent or a third party, a safety would activate and stop the swap.

Based on my observations, those seemed to be the details of the Package that Kodama Ryou was using. Some of that might not have been exactly right, but it had to be on the right track.

“Two cards.”

“Heh heh heh!!”

As soon as I made my announcement, the snakeskin guy burst out laughing.

“Oh, oh? Oh, oh, oh, oh!? I can’t be sure, but what is this? I thought you were going for a royal flush or straight flush of hearts? You had three of the needed cards, so what’s going on? Are you throwing away the two cards you got in the first exchange and getting two new ones? So you gained nothing at all and have no real chance of winning? What could possibly be going on here!?”

“…”

I did not need to answer.

I simply tossed the two face-down cards toward the dealer.

Kodama Ryou showed no interest in the cards I was dealt in return.

“Then I’ll take one. Just one. I actually have two I don’t need, but there’s no point in exchanging the other one,” said the laughing con artist. “Oh, and you can’t change anything with baseless accusations after the fact. Just to be clear, I *will* get the joker and complete my four of a kind. That will end this. No matter what anyone says, the result can’t be changed after the second exchange is complete. It saddens me to think you can’t use those provocations of yours anymore. Here, one card. I’ll use this joker to kill you.”

He slid a random card toward the dealer and another was slid back toward him.

If that was the joker, he would have an irregular four of a kind made up of three kings and the wild card.

He was exactly right.

The old lady whose pension was stolen, the granddaughter suffering from a created illness, and most importantly my own life would all be over.

However…

“……
Huh……?”

I heard a voice.

The con artist’s suit and shoes were covered in snakeskin and he always had a thin smile on his face, but a close look showed his fingertips were trembling. That tremor travelled up his arms and infected his entire body. Finally, his chair began to rattle below him.

“Wh-wh-why?”

“Did you see something strange?”

“*Why!? How could I possibly have not gotten the joker!!!???*”

Only after shouting did he realize what he had said. He cautiously looked to the gallery, but that no longer mattered.

The game was set from the moment he finished his second exchange.

“It’s not surprising you didn’t get the joker.”

I spoke casually because his life wasn't worth anything with more weight to it.

"After all, it's right here in my hand. *And the system was made so it wouldn't swap out a card your opponent or a third party was looking at, right?*"

"…What?"

"And without the joker, all you have is three kings."

As I spoke, I threw my fanned-out cards face-up on the table.

"*I have the ace of diamonds, the joker, the ace of hearts, the king of spades, and the eight of spades. With the joker, that's three aces.*"

"What!!!???"

It looked like the con artist wasn't the only one surprised.

A stir ran through the gallery as well.

"In poker, the cards get stronger from two to king, but the ace beats the king, right? That makes my three of a kind better than yours. The game is over, little boy."

"No… Not that!! What kind of hand is that!?"

"C'mon. I had the joker from the very beginning and it isn't that rare to end up with two aces. I don't see anything wrong with this."

"B-but…you…but! You were going for a royal flush or straight flush of hearts. You couldn't get a hand like this after the two card exchanges!"

"Yes, how *could* this have happened?"

There was no real reason to answer.

I only had to point out the result.

"This is over, so pull out your black card. Pull out that magic limitless card. You need to pay me my winnings. I bet a Zashiki Warashi on top of this junmai daiginjo from Noukotsu Village's Jinnai Brewery, so I'll be taking quite a lot."

"……
……"

As the snakeskin guy blankly listened to me, he finally shouted a few words as if life had returned to him.

"That makes no sense."

"It's nothing compared to how much you've been winning around here."

"But…this is…but!! Everyone here saw it, right? At the very beginning, you revealed your hand!! What more proof do you need? You clearly cheated somehow!! There's no other way you could have ended up with that!"

"…*Now you've said it.*"

I grinned.

This was probably the first time I'd smiled in front of him.

Those were exactly the words I had wanted to hear.

I snapped my fingers and made a show of checking with the gallery and dealer.

"You there, you heard what he said, didn't you?"

"Eh? What?"

"Dealer!! He said it. Check the rules. This fits the conditions perfectly!!"

Hearing that, Kodama Ryou began to tremble even more.

And he looked more surprised about the shaking than anyone.

"Wh-wha-what!? What have you done!?"

"You stepped on a landmine. Check for yourself!!"

Yes.

This casino had its own local rules:

If the joker is included in the deck, one of the players must announce it. The announcer's winnings for that hand will only be 0.8 times normal (with the exception of five of a kind that can only be made with a joker).

If the winner forms their hand after discarding the joker, their winnings will be twice normal.

If a player is caught cheating, they will be penalized twice their bet amount. However, a simple bluff does not qualify as cheating.

Cheating is eliminated by the thorough management of the dealer, but it can also be directly pointed out by an opponent.

But if the loser accuses the winner of cheating and no cheating can be proven, the loser will be penalized one hundred times their bet amount for ruining the game and damaging the winner's reputation.

If a player does not swap out a single card, their winnings will be 1.5 times normal.

"Whaaaaaaaat!!!???"

"You owe me one hundred times as much now. Everyone here can clearly tell I won and you lost. And now you're accusing me of cheating to try to overturn that. This is just hard to watch, you fraud. You took a step too far because you were still looking down on me even after losing."

“No, but, no!! I proved your hand made no sense! The loser can’t be penalized for revealing how the winner was cheating. …Guards!! Search him!! Hurry!!”

Kodama Ryou was as out of control as a toy chimpanzee with cymbals, but I simply raised my hands.

That seemed to clue the chimpanzee in that something was wrong.

As a guard began to check me, Kodama Ryou questioned me.

“H-how? How can you stay so calm?”

“Isn’t that obvious? Because unlike you, I wasn’t cheating.”

I grinned.

“Think back. Or have you altered your own memories? When the cards were first dealt, I did indeed reveal my hand, but all I did was tell you. You had to take my word for it. I didn’t actually show you my cards.”

“…Ah!!”

“*You* actually showed your cards, but that was probably to steal back people’s focus by doing something with an even greater impact. That makes it simple, doesn’t it? I didn’t actually have the cards I claimed I did.”

My real hand had been two threes, an ace, a joker, and some other useless card. That was actually a three of a kind with a chance for a full house, but it left me with no chance of defeating the snakeskin man and his ability to manipulate all of the hidden cards. Throwing away my two threes then had taken a lot of courage.

The real danger had been when he had sent me the king of spades. The Usuhiki Warashi Package could swap out cards and it still scares me to think what would have happened if he had swapped out the joker or an ace in place of the useless king.

He had to have gotten a card that was clearly not one of those I had announced. If he hadn’t thought it was one of the cards I got during the first exchange, he might have seen through my trick.

I had barely slipped through, but I had done it and won.

Finally, the man wearing gloves with a pentagram on them shook his head.

“Nothing.”

“You bastard! Check more carefully!! There has to…has to be something!!”

“There isn’t. And a simple bluff doesn’t count as cheating. The local rules say so.”

I made that clear just to be sure. The guard had to be allowing the Usuhiki Warashi. Had the con artist made sure the man wouldn’t say anything unnecessary?

I clapped my hands twice and announced Kodama Ryou’s execution.

“Now, then. It’s time you paid up my normal winnings times one hundred. Pull out your black card so I can take everything you’ve got.”

Cheers exploded from the gallery like after the winning point of a soccer match.

This was the moment where one side laughed and the other crumbled.

Part 12 (3rd person — Day 10/04 03:20 - 03:33)

Meanwhile, the fox, tanuki, and badger were waiting behind the casino.

After the Zashiki Warashi had been used as a decoy (without being told), Kodama Ryou and the guards had assumed nothing more was hiding out there.

The three of them were looking at the smartphone they had borrowed from the Zashiki Warashi.

“It says to go through with it.”

“W-will this really work?” worriedly asked the wet nurse tanuki.

“Hmm.” The fox tilted his head. “He explained this ahead of time, but I have trouble with those Western terms. Let’s see, it was Fleming’s…”

“Right hand. The left hand is used for the theory behind railguns.”

The fox grabbed at the badger for that bit of know-it-all-ism, but the tanuki stopped them before an actual fistfight broke out.

“Whatever the theory behind it, you know what to do, right? That’s all that matters.”

“Yes, that makes sense. But…”

“What else is there?”

“Can we really get back at loathsome Kodama Ryou with this children’s toy?”

At that point, they heard a girl giggling quietly.

“Who goes there!?”

The fox quickly turned around and saw someone running away.

It was a girl of twelve or thirteen. She wore a short mini-yukata with the shoulders slipped down like a courtesan, so her strange Japanese outfit looked something like a tube top dress with a tight skirt.

“Was that the Usuhiki Warashi? This isn’t good. Is that subspecies going to report on our actions!?”

“N-no,” said the badger to allay the wet nurse tanuki’s fears. “I think this is the opposite. That Usuhiki Warashi… That Zashiki Warashi subspecies is a Youkai of prosperity and she’s *leaving* the casino and thus her owner. That means only one thing for Kodama Ryou’s future.”

Part 13 (3rd person — Day 10/04 03:33 - 03:45)

“What are you waiting for? The guest gave you his card, didn’t he?”

“Yes, but I’m trying to make the pre-transaction confirmation.”

Kodama Ryou stood in a soundless world.

No, there was actually applause and a deluge of other sounds enveloping him, but it all seemed to so distant to him. His mind was in no state to comprehend the voices as voices, so it washed over him as mere noise.

It came out to several hundred million.

He was going to lose a full tenth of his total assets.

That was painful enough, but losing to an amateur high school boy was even worse.

“Heh heh… Heh heh heh heh heh heh…”

“N-no, wait, Miss Zashiki Warashi. We can talk this out! If humans and Youkai actually try to talk, they can get along! This was a necessary part of defeating that damn con artist, so- bgchah!?”

“Hey, Shinobu. Do you know what a Cobra Twist is? How about a Frankensteiner?”

“No, wait! You shouldn’t do a move like that in a yuka- gyaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!???”

As soon as she was released from the rope, the Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata began performing harsh pro wrestling moves and the high school boy could do nothing to escape them. Yes, he was only a kid. Normally, he would never have been able to deceive a professional (con artist) like Kodama Ryou.

His actions and words had been as exaggerated as a theatrical performance.

Kodama Ryou should have looked at it all more rationally. The boy had made a larger lie to hide a smaller lie. It was the same as scattering spices along a path to trick the police dog’s sense of smell.

It had been crudely done, but Kodama Ryou had taken it too lightly.

He had not followed through far enough to realize the boy had put together a plan where part of it was meant to be discovered.

And as a result…

(No.)

Once his thoughts reached that point, his Noh mask expression twisted.

(Something doesn’t fit. He blatantly said he was going to ruin me. Was that extreme statement really only a bluff meant to throw me off his scent? What if it meant something else…?)

Kodama Ryou lived for thrills.

When he had money, he had lots of it. When he had none, he had none at all. His scams, gambles, and art auctions were always an all-or-nothing affair and this was clearly during one of his “all” phases.

Even if that one hundred times penalty was added on, it would not take everything from him.

It would only rob him of a tenth of his money.

(There's something more.)

Sweat dripped down his face.

(He isn't done yet!! There has to be something more!!)

Suddenly, he heard a human voice.

"It doesn't seem to be the computer. There's been some strange noise on the line for a while now."

"If the payment is slowed, we'll lose the guests' trust. Hurry up and figure out what's causing it and take care of it."

The black card.

That special credit card had no credit limit.

They were having trouble during the confirmation phase.

There was some unknown noise on the line.

"A-ahh."

Kodama Ryou figured it out.

It all fit together.

There was a single way of robbing him of all his money regardless of how the game turned out.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh

After shouting and shouting, he suddenly trailed off.

No one – not the gallery, not the dealer, and not the guards – was listening to him. His words were reaching them, but they were not paying any attention to them. Some shrugged and some sighed.

And then the blond high school boy formed a gun with one hand while having his teary-eyed head pushed into one of the glamorous Zashiki Warashi's breasts by a headlock.

With a beautiful woman in one arm, he aimed the triumphant gesture at Kodama Ryou.

And he fired some powerful words.

"…Now you've said it."

"Ah."

"After everything is over, the loser has accused the winner of cheating. …Really? If you can't produce any proof, you'll get another one hundred times penalty. And two of those penalties on top of each other isn't two hundred times. One hundred times one hundred is ten thousand. You understand the situation, don't you?"

He was already losing a tenth of his total assets.

So if that was multiplied by one hundred…

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!
Vaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

“Have you heard of Fleming and his right and left hand rules?”

“Is he some important Westerner? Never heard of him!!”

“Don’t look so proud of that. His right hand rule goes like this. Say a wire is passing through a spring. Well, when power passes through the wire, it creates a magnetic field around the wire. And it’s based on this line.”

“?”

“The flow of electricity and the surrounding magnetic field are connected. Sending electricity through creates a magnetic field and creating a magnetic field around the wire creates an electric current.”

“What does that mean?”

“If you rub a powerful magnet up against it, you can disturb the signal running through the wire without cutting it. I’ll secretly send you an email to tell you when to start. After the game is over, we’ll give that con artist a lovely surprise.”

“Let’s do this!!”

“R-right! Leave it to a wet nurse tanuki like me!!”

“Hey, fox, are you sure this will work!?”

And thus the fox, tanuki, and badger interfered with the high-speed communications without leaving a mark on the cable and made Kodama Ryou suspect someone was skimming his black card’s number and PIN.

But as stated, the nondestructive magnetic method had not left any obvious marks. And of course, the Youkai had left by the time the guards in black had come to investigate.

And when they found no evidence, who would their suspicions turn to?

The frightening ten thousand times penalty said it all.

Part 15 (Day 10/04 04:01 - 06:30)

“Yayyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!!!!!”

It was time for a party!

I remembered I had yet to eat any dinner and it was somehow four in the morning already, so a party was the only answer.

Time! To! Eat!!

Afterwards, we all (although I was the only non-Youkai of the bunch) rented out the second story of a club until morning and clinked together small bottles of cider. The glass table was covered in fried chicken, French fries, pepperoncino, and other greasy foods you would never think to eat at four in the morning.

I was aware this seemed ridiculously out of place, but shockingly, this was the cheapest plan available on Goldmine Island. A tiny-little restaurant could actually be more expensive, so you could see how screwed-up the casino island's sense of money was. They didn't have any normal family restaurants or karaoke boxes.

"U-um," nervously began the wet nurse tanuki. "Should we really be doing this? The money we took from Kodama Ryou belonged to people he tricked across the country."

"Oh, it's fine, it's fine. We took as much as we could from his black card. We were at a table with a rate as high as four to five million, the Zashiki Warashi was added on top of that, and then came the fearsome ten thousand times penalty. That had to be far more than he'd every stolen. The con artist is going to be in a hell of debt now. We can still pay everyone back after taking a bit off the top to pay for our trouble."

"Oh? If we have extra, shouldn't you give the victims back even more? For example, you could give them enough to pay for their sick granddaughter's surgery in another country."

The fox, tanuki, and badger fell silent for a while. They thought about what that meant and then silently lowered their heads.

"Stop that. We would have messed up somewhere without the information on the Usuhiki Warashi. And you were the ones that set up the final trick with the magnet, so we're even here! The Zashiki Warashi and I just need this dinner…or is it a midnight snack? Or breakfast? Anyway, we'll just eat as much as we want and then you all can return the stolen money to its rightful owners. So let's get eating and drinking!!"

That must have cleared away their worries because the celebration really started afterwards. Foxfire flew around, the tanuki got on the table and beat her stomach like a drum, and the badger was entirely focused on mixing a ton of toppings in a bowl to create a badger udon. We were all doing different things.

"You are a crazy young man. You might be better at deceiving people than us."

"Eh heh heh. It all began when I climbed the maple tree behind the house and transformed into the moon because the wife of the house was sad that it was raining on the fifteenth night."

"There's a historical play based off of us three, you know? But the director was clueless and changed the badger to a dog because he thought a badger was too confusing."

After at most five minutes, we would find ourselves unable to settle down and would raise our bottles of cider again.

"Well, I don't really get any of this, but cheers!!"

We repeated the process twenty or thirty times.

There were no problems.

We had taken all the money from Kodama Ryou, the old woman who had collapsed from worry and the sick granddaughter would have what they needed to recover, and all of the victims around the country were guaranteed all of their money back. That

money had been left with an accountant Madoka knew. I didn't know the details of gift taxes and whatever else, so I could only leave that up to a specialist. And I could trust someone a friend introduced more than I could someone completely unknown.

So if there was nothing else, this would all end with the happiest ending possible.

Yes.

If there was nothing else.

Part 16 (Day 10/04 06:30 - 06:58)

"……
……Ahh."

"Shinobu."

Only once the glamorous Zashiki Warashi called out to me did I realize I was resting on the glass table.

It seemed I had fallen asleep for a bit.

We had had a hell of a party, but I hadn't had any alcohol. When I thought about it, I realized I hadn't slept since the airplane ride the day before. I had forgotten thanks to the extreme tension of the poker match against Kodama Ryou, but the weariness may have rushed back as soon as that tension vanished.

The three animal Youkai were asleep on the sofa or the floor and the Zashiki Warashi pulled the smartphone from her cleavage and checked he time.

"If we don't get back to the inn soon, we might miss breakfast."

"My dad would probably get mad if I missed two meals in a row. But, ugh. Will I even have room for breakfast if we head back now?"

Sleeping a bit may have actually made things worse because I felt an oozing sense of tingling acid rising from my stomach. This was the problem with eating so much greasy food.

I slowly got up and called out to the other Youkai.

"Hey, fox, tanuki, badger. It's time to wake up. We rented the place until morning, so if we stay any longer, they'll charge us extra."

"Mh? Did I fall asleep?"

The three of them got up while rubbing their eyes and then left the club's VIP room with the Zashiki Warashi and me. There were still quite a few people on the normal dance floor. They didn't look like the type to play video games, but they seemed pretty interested in cellphone avatars. They were all discussing the VR Casino City's friend registration, costume trading, or virtual land sales.

Palm trees grew alongside the wide roads on this island, but the air was nice and chilly this early in the morning.

With the intense morning sunlight replacing the decorative casino lights, a sleepy atmosphere finally began to set in. Shiny, polished luxury sports cars drove by every now and then, but the drivers' clothing didn't match the cars. They were probably from a valet service and the actual owner was taking a limousine back to their inn with a young, drunk woman.

"I was expecting nothing but Italian and German cars on a casino island, but there's a surprising number of Japanese ones."

"That's because Japan has some of the top brands for hybrids and electric cars. Teihin's complete carbon frame car had a rush of preorders despite costing two or three hundred million yen."

"Why do you know so much about this? You downloaded a stupidly expensive racing game app in my name or something, didn't you?"

The three animal Youkai intended to leave Goldmine Island and return to Shikoku. They hadn't come as tourists, so now that Kodama Ryou had been dealt with, they wanted to get back to their owner as soon as possible.

The three of them waved their short arms (or front legs?) as they left and the Zashiki Warashi and I started for the inn on the opposite side of Goldmine Island's mountain.

"Shinobu, I'm not sure we'll make it back in time for breakfast if we walk."

"I got enough from those three to take a taxi, so we can hail a limousine if we see one."

I had thought we would find one if we waited by the major road, but all of the limousines already had customers. It seemed we had hit the rush taking people back to the inns.

The Indoor Youkai gave a disappointed sigh as the limousines drove back and forth and my cellphone suddenly began to ring from my pocket.

I pulled it out and checked the screen, but I didn't recognize the number.

"I apologize for calling so early in the morning. This is Okazaki from National Flight Airline's Lost Baggage Management Center. Is this Mr. Jinnai Shinobu?"

"Oh, yes, it is."

"I have a report concerning the baggage you lost while taking Flight 5511 yesterday. I am terribly sorry for the inconvenience, but your travel bag has been safely located and we would appreciate it if you could pick it up at our airport counter at your soonest convenience."

"Eh? Oh, my bag? You found it!?"

"It has already been transported to the airport, so you can pick it up immediately if you wish. Just to be certain, we will need to confirm your identity at the counter, so please bring some form of ID with you."

Some form of ID?

What would work? I don't have a motorcycle license and I didn't bring my passport since we weren't leaving the country.

"Um, would my student ID work?"

"Ah ha ha. I would need to be a little more official than that. For example, a driver's license or insurance card."

An insurance card, huh?

Does my mom have mine?

As I wondered that, I saw an electrical car moving slowly along the road.

I casually glanced over at the slow black Japanese sports car from the sidewalk.

But then my eyebrows rose.

There was no one in the driver's seat.

And before I could wonder why, the sports car seemed to swell out from within as it exploded from quite nearby.

Part 17 (Day 10/04 06:58 - 07:10)

My consciousness briefly but undeniably blanked out.

By the time I realized I had spent those few seconds in the air, I had flown two or three meters and landed on the sidewalk.

"G-gbh!? Ggah!!"

After a short delay, I heard the high-pitched sound of windows shattering on the stores lining the street.

I tried to check on the situation, but my vision kept shaking and wouldn't settle down. My arms and legs were trembling, so I couldn't get up either.

What?

What the hell is going on!?

My mind was unsteady and my senses were ruled by the strange stench of the rising smoke. It was different from gasoline. I also sensed distant screams and something like camera flashes.

And despite it all, the Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata was standing there no different from normal.

"I can't say I'm surprised that you instinctually tried to use me as a shield, Shinobu."

"Well, you're standing there triumphantly after a close-range explosion, so I'd say I made the right decision."

Even after more than ten seconds had passed, I still couldn't stand up.

I somehow managed to shake my head and got my eyes to focus.

I could tell someone was approaching us from beyond the black smoke.

Fire…fighters?

That's what I assumed since the men wore shiny silver fire-resistant suits, but a powerful tug soon reached my arm.

"Wh-what are you doing, Zashiki Warashi?"

"How long has it been since the explosion?" she asked casually. "It can't have been more than a minute. Even for a small island, this was too fast. But this gives them the perfect opportunity to hide their identities while taking away the victim."

"Wait a second. You mean…?"

"There's no time for questions."

Looking truly annoyed, the Zashiki Warashi grabbed me under each arm and started dragging me away. The supposed firefighters' shoulders twitched and they began racing toward us more quickly.

The Zashiki Warashi finally placed me over her shoulder like a sack of rice and ran into an alley-like gap between two buildings.

After turning a few corners, she crouched down behind a large metal dumpster.

Footsteps rushed away in the wrong direction.

I still couldn't move very well, but I just barely managed to move my mouth.

"Wh-what is going on?"

"I don't know. Any idea who might want to attack you?"

"Kodama Ryou? Although I'm pretty sure I could take care of him myself."

"I doubt that fallen warrior has any forces leftover."

"What about the casino? He had bribed a few of the guards in black, right? Y'know, the ones with enough of a spiritual sense to detect occult cheating."

"Oh, the perverts who put that turtle shell bondage on me. I remember that verrrrry well."

"Cough, cough!"

"But the special casino district keeps out *large criminal organizations*, remember?"

"Dangerous people don't have to come from outside. The casinos have a ton of money and they'll gather military might to protect it. And as their influence grows, they'll end up no different from some kind of mafia."

"Even if the casinos can be dangerous, they didn't lose anything this time. You played directly against Kodama Ryou, so they have no reason to get back that money."

“Perhaps not.” I slowly sighed. “Then let’s think about this differently. We won a direct game against Kodama Ryou and took well over ten billion yen from him. What if someone who saw that decided they could swipe that money from the amateur who took it?”

For one thing, it was a miracle I was still alive after a car bomb went off so close by. What if that hadn’t been meant to kill me? What if they were actually trying to abduct me to get my bank account number? Explaining it with malice seemed to make more sense than by calling it a coincidence or a miracle.

“That increases the number of suspects quite a bit. The staff and gallery who were in the casino itself are of course suspect, but who knows how far the rumor has spread in the hours since.”

“In the worst case, we might need to suspect every single person on Goldmine Island.”

I really didn’t want to think about the possibility, but the fox, tanuki, and badger weren’t completely above suspicion. Any one of them could have betrayed us and we had no way of proving that the entire story about the old master and sick granddaughter was true.

Fortunately, the money itself had been left with an accountant Madoka knew, so no one could steal the money even if these mystery attackers tried to get it out of me.

However, that did not guarantee I would survive.

I was completely helpless here.

“Shinobu, what are you going to do now?”

“Is it safe to use my cellphone? At any rate, I need to call my parents and meet up with them. This could cause them trouble, too.”

“We can’t trust the casinos on the front side of the island or the goldmine city on the back side. If you take a limousine taxi, it could easily take you somewhere up in the mountain and walking will take you through a lot of isolated places. It’s going to be dangerous no matter what you do.”

“There’s one way.”

When would strength return to my body?

I tried my best to move my limbs, but they would only tremble a bit.

“Goldmine Island is divided between the central mountain and the coastal areas and the coast is divided between the casino city and the goldmine city that contains the inns. There are only so many routes going around the mountain and it would be easy to lie in wait there. Whether by car or on foot, we’d probably be attacked.”

“And?”

“We just have to make our way through the center. That huge mountain contains a goldmine, so there has to be a labyrinth of passageways through it. If we take a shortcut through those tunnels, we might be able to slip past their ambush and reach the inn.”

Mysterious footsteps moved by surprisingly nearby.

It was frightening, but staying in one place would only get us caught eventually. They had to know our general location.

“Hey, Zashiki Warashi. Do you think you can carry me through the mountain?”

“I’m really thinking about leaving you here and escaping on my own.”

“I really will come back to haunt you, dammit.”

As the footsteps grew more distant, the Zashiki Warashi started to move out from behind the dumpster with me over her shoulder again, but we immediately gave up.

“It’s no use. They’ll definitely find us.

“We need to figure something out. This spot won’t be safe forever.”

“Wait a second.”

For some reason, she reached for the lid of the metal dumpster we were hiding behind.

Did she just grab something?

All of a sudden, the Glamorous Youkai loosened her obi and began removing her yukata.

“Wait! What are- gweh!?”

Her bright white skin stabbed into my eyes and I almost cried out, but that damn Zashiki Warashi stepped on my face to cover my mouth!

“In a casino city, a red yukata and a school uniform stand out, but these fake firefighters will be looking for that stronger impression. If we alter our hairstyles and change clothes, we can leave without even trying to hide. If they see us head-on, we’ll still be in trouble, but they won’t know it’s us from behind.”

“Mghmgh…cough! Wh-what do you mean change clothes?”

The nude Zashiki Warashi swung a few small scraps of cloth around.

“A couple must have slipped back here for some sex last night because there was an abandoned bikini here.”

“Wow! Why would you want to pick up something like- bgh!?”

She must have had no choice given the situation because she put on the skimpy bikini despite normally only ever wearing the kimono.

She tied bows in the side strings and I somehow managed to speak again.

“Hey, that solves it for you, but what am I supposed to do?”

“Oh? Nothing to worry about.”

For some reason, a bewitching smile appeared on her face.

“I said a couple had used this spot for sex, remember? There’s a men’s swimsuit here too.”

“…Wait.”

“Sorry, but I don’t think the situation leaves you with much choice.”

“Wait! Wait just a- mgh!? Don’t step on my face, you idiot! That discarded swimsuit scares me! It’s unsanitary!! And stop that! Quit pulling off my clothes!!”

“C’mon, Shinobu. Your big sis will help you get changed, okay?”

After a humiliating five minutes, we were ready for battle.

Instead of carrying me over her shoulder, the Zashiki Warashi supported me with that shoulder like I was simply drunk.

As soon as we slowly stood up from behind the metal dumpster, I felt several gazes stabbing into my back.

“Honey, I think you drank too much.”

“I want to forget everything. Where’s the booze!?”

“Shout like that and it’ll all come back up. C’mon, let’s get back to the inn.”

Even so, we couldn’t stay still and we couldn’t run away either. We had to slowly make our way unsteadily forward.

Fortunately, no one demanded we stop.

The Zashiki Warashi headed behind the casinos and into the mountain forest.

While the city was filled with bright lights, it had been quickly constructed for the special casino district project and the city wasn’t all that wide. If one left the main

road that passed through the center, it wasn't far to reach a dense forest. The forest was mostly made up of pineapple-like tropical trees that one could use to make a leaf swimsuit, but there were a few maple and gingko trees here and there. I couldn't help but notice the spots of red or yellow amid the green.

I was still supported by the Zashiki Warashi's shoulder, but I could move my fingers enough to operate my cellphone.

"It's no use. Neither of my parents is answering."

I was concerned, but worrying about it wouldn't help.

I refocused my mind and contacted someone else.

"Madoka!"

"You need help again?"

Morning or night, this eccentric beauty was always tons of help.

Or so I thought.

"Shinobu-kun, let me ask you one thing first: what have you gotten yourself into now?"

"Eh? What? Well, as I said before, I took on the con artist named Kodama Ryou and…"

"Not that." She cut me off with an awfully, awfully cold voice. "I'm sorry, Shinobu-kun, but you need to back out of this. What you've gotten yourself involved in will heavily influence my territory. This will actually affect me, so if you insist on doing anything more…"

Was this really Madoka I was speaking with?

Was it possible someone had transformed into her like that one time?

I couldn't help but suspect that given her tone of voice.

"Then I will use my money and soldiers to crush you."

She hung up.

I knew this was hardly the time, but I simply stared blankly at the phone for a while. What was going on? How had Madoka ended up as my enemy?

"Shinobu."

"R-right. I can't hope for any advice from Madoka, so we'll have to get through this on our own."

"Sigh. Was there enough money involved to turn her against you?"

"Honestly, I don't even know what kind of world she lives in."

My nervous homeroom teacher had asked me to look after her, but if someone had asked me if I had made my way deep into her mind over the past few months, I would have had to answer “no”. She was someone whose thought patterns I simply couldn’t read. I may have done something to anger her, but there was no point in figuring out what it was now.

“What are we going to do?”

“Head for the inn using the tunnels through the mountain. Then we can meet up with my parents.”

“And after that?”

The second question silenced me as I leaned on her shoulder, but I finally answered honestly.

“Do you really think I have any idea?”

Part 18 (Day 10/04 07:20 - 07:25)

By the time we set foot in the goldmine’s tunnel, feeling had returned to my arms and legs. I of course decided to remove the mystery swimsuit and put back on my school uniform, but…

“Look the other way, Zashiki Warashi!”

“I have no interest in your body, so what does it matter?”

“And stop stripping right in front of me! You’re not a much-older sister that only sees me as a kid!”

“I pretty much am. How many times do you think we’ve bathed together?”

“…I still think you should at least hide behind the rocks over there!!”

After changing, we threw away the swimsuits and finally moved deeper into the tunnel. I just hoped it would take us all the way to the opposite side of the mountain.

We continued walking through the manmade cave that was smelled strongly of dirt.

My cellphone’s backlight was our only source of light. There was a row of covered lightbulbs near the tunnel ceiling, but we couldn’t find a switch and we were afraid using the electricity would reveal our location.

“This isn’t good. The battery’s only going to last for about an hour. After that, we’ll be stuck in the dark.”

“Yeah, and the smartphone is nearly dead.”

“If only we could find a flashlight or materials for a torch somewhere.”

It was hard to believe I had been playing poker in a dazzling casino not long before.

The miners must have set up a communications antenna because my phone just barely still had a connection, so if I had wanted to, I could have played the slots in the VR Casino City or sold my avatar's old clothes in my own virtual shop.

The manmade tunnel was fairly narrow and I could touch both walls if I stretched my arms out to either side. I was also nearly hitting my head on the ceiling. There were two small rails running along the ground which I assumed were for a mine cart. The sides of the narrow hole were only reinforced by some carelessly placed logs, so I would never have wanted to go in there normally.

"It branches off all over the place."

"They probably just dug wherever they wanted without much planning. Anyway, let's follow the track on through. That should at least avoid wandering around in circles."

An Intellectual Village was a system that achieved massive profits by turning the rural into a brand name.

The value of pure gold was determined internationally, so I didn't see much point in making a brand name out of its source. Still, there were exceptions even there.

In addition to weight and percentage, it seemed some extra value could be added to a ring based on where the gold had come from. As could be seen in legends from around the world, it wasn't unusual to find the idea of "special gold" (although it tended to take the form of harmful cursed gold), so this was less about creating a new way of thinking and more about recalling an older way of thinking. If it caught on, it could easily spread around the world in no time.

Even so-called "pure" gold was technically only 99.99…9% pure and 100% pure gold didn't exist, so it seemed research was being done to determine the source of the gold based on a detailed examination of the remaining components.

I remembered Madoka actually sounding pretty shaken because creating different grades of gold would throw the financial markets into chaos.

Madoka…

"What is it, Shinobu?"

"Nothing. Let's just get out of here and meet up with my parents at the inn. I'm sure they have some work to do here, but safeguarding our lives comes first. If we can't trust anyone on the island, it would be best to escape outside the island."

As I spoke, we walked deeper and deeper down the tunnel.

The cellphone's backlight only dimly illuminated the area around my hand, so I couldn't even see the ground clearly. I naturally ended up keeping a hand on the wall as I walked, but the damp stone and dirt was not a pleasant sensation. My fingers sometimes felt something similar to rubber or plastic, so I looked over and saw thick cables running along the rugged stone.

I thought nothing of it at first, but then I looked back.

"What is this? Why's there a cable here?"

As I had said, the cellphone was the only source of light. The cable didn't seem connected to the tunnel's lightbulbs or fluorescent lights and I hadn't seen a fan blowing fresh air into the stale tunnel.

In that case, what was the cable powering?

Unpleasant questions floated up in the back of my mind like bubbles in a rotten swamp. The sticky bubbles slowly grew, stuck together, and filled my entire head.

I felt like this was something I could not afford to overlook.

It seemed to lead to some fatal conclusion.

Yes.

That's right.

How were we attacked after our victory in the casino? An unmanned car packed with explosives. …But who could easily bring something so dangerous into the casino city?

"This is bad, Zashiki Warashi."

"?"

"Really bad!! The bomb came from this mine!! That means we didn't escape here of our own free will. We were attacked by a blatant car bomb and then the firefighters approached so slowly. They intentionally guided us to the goldmine where there are no witnesses so they could finish us off on their own turf. In that case, this cable must be-…!!"

I never finished my explanation.

Before I could, a deafening explosion filled my vision with dirt and dust.

Part 19 (Day 10/04 07:29 - 07:50)

"…Ugh…"

I opened my eyes to find nothing but darkness.

I couldn't tell whether I had simply had my eyes closed or if I had been knocked unconscious for a long period of time.

This wasn't like the earlier car bomb. A strange sense of pressure assaulted me from every direction.

I patted across my upper body with both hands. I could move my limbs and I could breathe. As I gradually gathered information, I could feel the uneasy pressure gradually soften. At the very least, I didn't seem to have been buried alive. However, the scent of dirt was even stronger than before and it felt a little difficult to breathe, although I couldn't tell whether that was an issue of oxygen levels or my own mental state.

Light.

Where's the light? Where's my cellphone???

I couldn't see my hand in front of my face, so I felt up ahead while crawling. I quickly ran into the wall and the limited space just about made me cry. My heart was about to break, so I scolded myself and continued working. Finally, I felt some plastic.

"There it is."

My trembling fingers felt across the slight bumps to operate the buttons.

The faint backlight seemed quite bright now.

"This is awful," I muttered without thinking.

Just a few meters ahead, the tunnel had collapsed. A wall of stone and dirt completely filled the tunnel and there was obviously no chance of digging through by hand.

Then again, when I looked the other way, I only found more dirt. The overwhelming amounts got my legs trembling. There was less than ten meters of free space left. I could not continue on or turn back and I doubted there were any ways out along the walls.

The dirt hadn't come down on my head, but this was no different from being closed in a large coffin.

I didn't know how long the air would last.

What was I supposed to do?

I was at a loss, so I meaninglessly pointed the backlight here and there. But in all three hundred and sixty degrees, I found nothing but wet dirt, dirt, dirt, dirt, dirt, dirt, dirt, and a figure in a yukata.

"…!!!???"

As soon as she entered my field of vision, I thought my mind was going to explode.

She was crouched down with her back to the wall and her long hair hid her face.

For an instant, I thought she was a cursed doll, but it was actually the glamorous Zashiki Warashi.

However…

I could only hear one person breathing inside this small, sealed space. Her hair, clothing, and fingertips were stained with unpleasant dirt, but she did not so much as twitch.

She didn't look like a living being.

She seemed as unreal as an eerie shadow caught in the corner of a photograph.

It was as if…

As if…

“Hey.”

I sank down to the ground and opened my mouth without thinking.

“Please stop that. …Please just stop it.”

Mine was the only voice. There was no response.

It truly felt like I was the only one there. Was that figure really composed of matter? Her presence was so faint, I doubted even that.

Finally, her white fingertip moved ever so slightly as she sat with her back to the wall.

She wrote something in the dirt: try not to waste the air.

Oh, so that’s why.

She technically didn’t need water or food and this explained why she seemed so inanimate.

I scratched at my head, realized my hand was covered in dirt, and clicked my tongue.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s hopeless either way. Whether we die here or someone shows up to rescue us, we still lost. For one thing, I think this situation is exactly what they had planned.”

I heard the woman in a yukata move her head a little.

She had likely tilted it to indicate confusion.

“If someone does come to save us, who do you think will show up first? Firefighters or a rescue team, right? And that’s how they were dressed. After burying us alive, they’ll be the ones to dig us up. They set it all up themselves, but it gives them the perfect opportunity to abduct someone while the public watches on. So we’re beat. Even if we know it’s coming, we can’t escape it.”

The mine was likely rigged with explosives at set intervals. No matter what path we had taken, they would have detonated the tunnel ahead of and behind us to trap us in a cage of dirt.

“We’ve lost, but at least that means they’ll dig us out. So don’t worry about the air, Zashiki Warashi. Discussing what’s to come is more important.”

At that point, a clear change entered the darkness: I heard someone exhale.

It looked like a switch had been thrown as the creepy woman returned to being a good-for-nothing indoor Youkai. Saying her heart resumed beating or breath returned to her lungs seemed to fit perfectly. And now that she was “back”, the cold dirt cell gained the life and familiarity of a school classroom.

“Honestly, why do I have to get caught up in this nonsense?”

“Don’t ask me.”

“Just to be sure, Shinobu, they’ll let me go if I hand you over, right?”

“This really might be the last time we see each other, so how about we have a nice intimate goodbye?”

But realistically, was there anything we could do?

The car bomb and the explosives set up inside the tunnel had probably come from this goldmine, so the miners were the most likely suspects.

But that was all we knew.

What would they do after digging us out? It seemed likely they wanted the billions of yen we’d taken from Kodama Ryou, but that had been left with Madoka’s accountant and we couldn’t withdraw a single yen of it ourselves. But would they accept that? And if not, what would they do with us?

If they took us somewhere, we would probably be bound, so was there any chance of turning this around, any way to escape, or any way to contact the authorities?

“Shinobu.”

As I explained my thinking, the Zashiki Warashi cut in.

“Doesn’t that seem odd, though?”

“What? How exactly is it odd?”

“Your premise is that someone heard about your win in the casino and attacked to take that money.”

What was she talking about?

What other possible reason could someone have to attack?

“That may be a perfectly good reason to attack, but doesn’t this seem too elaborate? Unlike blades or blunt weapons, it takes a lot of effort to handle explosives safely. Where did they get the car? What about the firefighters’ special fire-resistant suits? How many hours must it have taken to place explosives at set intervals through the mine?”

“…”

“And it’s only been a few hours since you won in the casino. You would have a hard time simply finding tightlipped accomplices in that time, so they couldn’t have put together an actual plan yet.”

Could you look at it that way?

It was true that it seemed rather intricate for a sudden and impulsive attack. After all, they couldn’t have known exactly where we would run. They would have needed to seal off our other options to ensure checkmate even if we hadn’t escaped into the mine.

How much preparation, manpower, and time would it have taken to accomplish all of that?

If they had just decided to attack as soon as they caught scent of the money, they would only have had to put on a mask and attack with a metal pipe in one hand.

“Wait a minute. Then who attacked us?”

“Do you really think I know that?”

“They at least went to the effort of burying us alive to get us to do something, but I can’t think of anything else worth all that other than the casino money!”

“We probably can’t even come up with a countermeasure unless we figure out what they’re after. Holding a shield up in the wrong direction will just get you stabbed in the side.”

I heard a dull thud and instinctually looked over. I could tell the thick wall of dirt was crumbling a little. I heard something like giant gears turning and it gradually grew louder.

“Dammit.”

I instinctually looked to the Zashiki Warashi.

What if? What if they truly weren’t attacking because of the casino incident? What if my very first assumption had been wrong?

Then it was possible I wasn’t their target at all.

There was someone else here.

It was entirely possible they had been after the Zashiki Warashi all along!

With a dull sound, something like a metal stake covered in lots of spikes broke through.

The dirt wall was being removed, but I didn’t feel the slightest happiness at being rescued and allowed out.

Hands reached in. All I saw were hands, hands, hands.

I’m sure I shouted something then, but the men in shiny fire-resistant suits didn’t react in the slightest. The shields protecting their faces hid their expressions from view and they threatened me by pushing forward a rotating blade that measured over a meter long.

And the hands were reaching for someone else.

I saw the Zashiki Warashi grabbed by the many hands and forced to her feet. Youkai were much stronger than humans. While she looked slender, she could probably literally kick them around despite how outnumbered she was.

But it was obvious why she obeyed them: the blade drill pushed up against my chest!

She glanced over at me just once, but she said nothing, faced forward again, and was tugged out through the hole.

She was taken away.

She disappeared from view.

“Dammit…”

As the Zashiki Warashi was dragged on ahead, the men dressed as firefighters left the tunnel, one by one. Once only the one pressing the weapon to my chest remained, he tossed a small memo my way.

It contained eleven numbers.

It was a cellphone number.

After I was finally left alone and still covered in dirt, I made my way back the way I had come. I didn’t run across anyone all the way to the bright entrance. They may have already taken the Zashiki Warashi out or they may have taken a different path through the spider web of tunnels to head to the other side of the island.

I was out of hints.

I had no idea whatsoever where the Zashiki Warashi was.

“Goddammiii

“I thought your panic would last a little longer or you would go crying to your parents or the police.”

A strange scraping noise accompanied the voice.

Was it fingernails?

It wasn’t quite the sound of biting them, so the person may have had a habit of scratching the plastic body of the phone.

“Youkai have no rights,” I explained. “They can’t be accused of a crime even if they kill someone, but that also means they don’t benefit from any other social services. Even if they’re abducted in broad daylight, the police can’t do anything about it. After all, they aren’t human.”

And if the police couldn’t do anything, talking to my parents wouldn’t help either.

One’s parents were reliable, but they weren’t all powerful. Everyone knew that by the time they entered middle school.

“How wise of you. But it may be one of your strong points that you don’t make that sound coldhearted.”

“I know you didn’t just want to chat. What do you want me to do?”

“I’m glad you understand. That way I won’t have to explain or demonstrate that *we have a method of killing Youkai.*”

A squeezing ache filled my chest.

If he had been standing in front of me when he said that, I might have torn out his windpipe with my teeth.

Kodama Ryou and the casino had used a special rope to bind the Zashiki Warashi. They had crushed a stone mill to powder, placed it in a furnace, and created a special glass fiber rope. It had likely been made for the Usuhiki Warashi, a subspecies, but if they used it on her…

If they created a blade or bullet out of the stone mill glass fiber…

“Our instructions are simple. Obey them and we will release the Zashiki Warashi. And simple as they are, this is something only you can do. Can we count on you?”

If this is their true objective, does that mean they aren’t even after the Zashiki Warashi?

No, I need to assume something else might be underway at the same time.

“What do you want?”

“*Your travel bag that ended up as lost baggage.* Pick it up at the airport counter and bring it to us.”

“What?”

At first, I didn’t understand.

They didn’t want the money I’d won at the casino or the Zashiki Warashi that had supported our Intellectual Village house for so long. Why were they so fixated on a student’s luggage? They had even used explosives and firefighter suits, which weren’t easy to get your hands on.

“I won’t ask you again.”

“Wait, wait! What do you want with that suitcase? There’s nothing much in there. In fact, I think the suitcase itself might be the most valuable part. So…!!”

“We are not here to answer questions. Pick up your bag and call us again once you leave the airport.”

“But I’m covered in mud!! If I head to the reception counter like this, they’ll definitely be suspicious. If you want me to do this for you, then compromise at least a little!!”

“Then stop by your inn for a change of clothes.”

“So you’re fine with my parents stopping me after they see me like this? And how am I supposed to explain the Zashiki Warashi’s absence?”

“You can buy new clothes.”

“They don’t sell clothes in a casino city. Or do you think they wouldn’t suspect a thing if I showed up at the airport dressed as a bunny girl?”

I heard him click his tongue and the scratching on the cellphone’s body continued.

After some time to think, he replied.

“There are some coin lockers in Building A at the airport. Open #0934 and take what is inside.”

“A coin locker? So where do I get the key?”

“#0934 won’t be locked. It will contain the key to another locker. Use that to open the other locker, which will hold a change of clothes.”

“Understood.”

“Now, listen. We won’t give you anything more than that. If you don’t pick up your bag, you will never see your Zashiki Warashi again.”

“I get it!!”

I hung up and had some things to do.

The first of course was picking up my suitcase. They obviously wouldn’t have gone to all this trouble to steal some kid’s clothes and handheld game system, so there had to be some kind of secret. Without knowing what they were after, I couldn’t figure out what their Achilles’ heel was. I needed to find it, use it as a shield, and take back the Zashiki Warashi.

Secondly, someone would be putting some clothes in the airport coin locker soon. If I could capture them and get some information from them that they didn't want me to know, then I could throw a wrench in their plans.

I was prepared to use any means necessary.

Part 21 (Day 10/04 08:23 - 08:37)

I was covered in dirt and only had a bit of change.

I couldn't use a taxi like that and I didn't care what people thought about me at this point, so I ran full speed toward the floating airport connected to the island. Fortunately, Goldmine Island was small. All of the facilities were packed in enough that you could get anywhere on foot so long you didn't wear yourself out.

Or so it should have been.

"…Gh…"

My legs wobbled and tripped.

I couldn't even run properly.

I had barely had any sleep since the previous day, I had consumed tons of food and drink with no thought about the consequences, my head had been shaken by an explosive blast (even if they had been holding back), I had been buried alive, and I had undergone the mental shock of having the Zashiki Warashi taken from me before my eyes.

It had all come together at once.

But that was no excuse. The situation was already underway. If I didn't catch them putting the items in the lockers, I couldn't get a step ahead of them. If I just did what they said and followed the rails they had laid out for me, I might not get the Zashiki Warashi back.

"Uuh…"

My vision blurred.

I felt dizzy, so I leaned up against a nearby streetlight and tried to catch my breath. The sweat on my brow felt oddly cold.

I was starting to feel anemic and my weakness started snowballing out of control.

Even if I did reach the airport, what could I even do? I was only a high school boy and I was alone. Could I really spot the suspicious person in a large cloud? How many people used the coin lockers? It was possible there would be more than one enemy there and they could have been monitoring my every move. What could I do? Was there anything I could do besides obeying them?

That wasn't being logical. I was simply giving up.

I shook my head and gathered my strength to start moving again.

And as I almost collapsed forward, something soft supported my head.

It was a young woman’s breasts.

“U-um, what are you doing? You look awfully pale.”

“Wah!?”

I moved away so quickly I almost fell backwards, but the woman only looked confused.

A closer look showed she wore a maid uniform with a miniskirt and her short hair was dyed in a mesh of black and brown. The breasts I had buried my face in were quite large. I naturally didn’t know anyone on Goldmine Island, so I could only imagine she was some kind person who had called out to me because I didn’t look well. Her outfit was strange, but in a city where bunny girls roamed the streets, that didn’t seem to matter.

However, the woman gave me a troubled look.

“Oh, dear. It’s me.”

“?”

“I am the wet nurse tanuki.”

Part 22 (Day 10/074 08:45 - 08:55)

Based on what the tanuki told me, it seemed the fox, tanuki, and badger had snuck into Goldmine Island by stowing away aboard a luxury cruise ship. They had intended to leave the same way, but none of the ships left until past noon and they had nothing else to do until then.

“The best method is to sneak into the cargo hold in our small animal forms and then transform into humans. They check on the cargo hold from time to time, but after checking people’s tickets when they board, they don’t suspect anyone onboard. They assume there is no way to slip past the gate.”

There seemed to be different conditions for each one, but these three filled in the details of their transformations by walking through human civilization and blending in. They were apparently in the middle of doing that now.

“At any rate, this is great. I think luck has seriously turned my way.”

“Oh, um, what?”

“Can you contact the fox and badger? I could use some help right now, so could you do something for me?”

The other two arrived before long.

The fox looked like the kind of athletic young man who would be chosen as a world cup representative and the badger looked like a cool, perfectly-proportioned prince with silky blond hair and a dark suit.

I-I know it isn’t surprising Youkai all end up so attractive since they can freely take on any design they imagine, but could you please stop making visuals where I blend into the background! It’s depressing!!

After I explained the details, the soccer player, the maid, and the prince began ruining their attractive aura by speaking with their usual voices.

“H-how dastardly!! If they are going to kidnap that poor Zashiki Warashi for a mere travel bag, I must punish them!!”

“Leave it to wet nurse like me. We owe you for saving our family, so I am more than willing to help.”

“Fear not, boy. We were already feeling bad about leaving the island without doing anything to repay you.”

Oh, c’mon!! Everything they say sounds like it’s straight out of a puppet show, but I’m being overwhelmed by their sparkling good looks! I want to punch them so bad since I’d settled for the comedian route where I win girls over with my conversational skills instead of my looks!!

“So what are we supposed to do? I’m ready to tear apart those ruffians with my splendid claws!”

“No, no. The proper way to handle ruffians has always been to stuff them in a pot for dinner. Leave it all to a wet nurse like me.”

“Heh heh heh. I’m starting to remember the flavor of blood that the old lady banned.”

“Wait, wait, you idiots. Yeah, all three of you!! If you talk about stuffing people in a pot for dinner when you look like that, you sound like legit criminals! That’s not what I was asking. Can we start by thinking of a way to rescue the Zashiki Warashi?”

The perfectly-proportioned idiots gave me looks that asked what we were supposed to do, so I suggested an impromptu plan.

“For example, what about this?”

Yes.

I was no longer alone. With four people, my options were bound to grow.

Part 23 (3rd person — Day 10/04 09:00 - 09:10)

Several men and women were hidden within the crowd of people inside Goldmine Island’s floating airport.

They had wireless microphones on their sleeves and stun guns, knives, and handguns hidden in their pockets.

“Target confirmed. Just as mentioned in the ‘discussion’ that dirt stands out a little too much.”

After seeing a blond boy in dirty clothes enter the airport’s front entrance, a man spoke as he leaned against a pillar.

“There’s no sign of anyone else, so he appears to be alone as planned.”

After confirming that the boy disappeared into the corridor leading to Building A, the man stepped away from the pillar and slowly followed the boy while pulling a rolling suitcase behind him.

The outer wall was made of glass to allow the morning sun in, but an oddly dangerous atmosphere filled the building.

“He isn’t taking any detours on the way and he doesn’t seem to be contacting anyone by phone.”

The blond boy was on his way to the coin lockers in Building A.

After picking up some new clothes there, he was supposed to stop by the lost baggage management counter.

Since he showed no sign of trying anything, it seemed he was too exhausted and nervous to put together a plan. The man felt this was a good sign.

“The target has arrived at Building A’s coin lockers. He has picked up the clothes. He will probably stop by somewhere to change, presumably the restroom. I can only watch the exit from the outside for that.”

As he spoke under his breath, the man began pursuing the blond boy again.

And then…

“Hi, there.”

He suddenly heard a voice from behind.

It was the voice of the blond boy he was supposed to be monitoring.

“Wha-…!?”

He frantically turned around, but a hand grabbed his collar before he could do anything. The other hand reached toward his belt and he felt something being pulled out. His back was then slammed into the row of lockers with tremendous force.

As he gasped for breath, the man saw the familiar blond boy in front of him.

After fierce laughter, the boy spoke.

“Surprised?”

The boy held a knife and the man recognized it as the one he had carried.

The tip of the blade gently stroked the man’s stomach.

“What…is…?”

Cornered, the man looked back and forth between the boy right in front of him and the identical boy walking cluelessly away with his change of clothes.

Then the one holding his collar spoke.

“That’s the wet nurse tanuki.”

Part 24 (3rd person — Day 10/04 09:15 - 09:33)

Jinnai Shinobu walked down the airport corridor with his arm still around the shoulders of a man in a cheap suit. After a while, they reached a metal door. It was a janitor's supply closet and it opened from the inside after Jinnai Shinobu knocked lightly. However, it was not a person who poked their head out; it was a fox walking on its hind legs.

"Get in," said Shinobu.

He shoved on the man's back, causing him to fall on the floor and knock over a pile of boxes filled with cleaning supplies, but the man was focused on the knife in the boy's hand.

"I won't talk."

Jinnai Shinobu and the fox ignored him, searched through his suit and checked each pocket.

They spoke to each other while ignoring their hostage.

"Here's his ID. His name is Emura Ryouichi. Looks like he's a local."

"He doesn't have much in his wallet. Should we check the suitcase, too?"

Having one's name found out created a certain type of fear.

That meant the danger could extend beyond this single incident. It opened up the possibility of revenge a year or even a decade later.

"I won't talk!! Have you forgotten that we have a hostage!?"

The two continued ignoring him.

"I recorded his voice, so check over it. You can get by as long as you memorize his speech mannerisms, right?"

"A video would have been best. Well, if I check over his build, I can guess pretty well how he carries himself when he walks."

To Emura Ryouichi, something seemed off about this conversation.

He had not been brought out of the public eye so they could take cruel revenge or to get him to tell them everything he knew.

They had other plans.

"In that case, fox, transform into him right away."

"So I transform into the enemy and pretend to have captured you to infiltrate them further? Of course, it won't be me that the organization ends up hunting down as a traitor."

Part 25 (3rd person — Day 10/04 09:33 - 09:40)

Unsurprisingly, the other members noticed what had happened.

For one thing, they had been keeping close contact with Emura Ryouichi by radio, so all of the other members heard the entire conversation.

“Satou, Suzuki! They’re in Building A’s equipment storage room. Take care of this before airport security catches on!!”

They were panicked, but not because they cared about Emura.

If Jinnai Shinobu shut himself up in there, they would have no way to access the lost suitcase. And if he was taken into protective custody, his luggage would be recovered by the police. Either way, the “item” hidden in the suitcase would escape their grasp again.

“What do we do about the one who took the clothes? The one they called a wet nurse tanuki.”

“Leave her. I’m sure they’ll ask some questions to ensure his identity in addition to checking his ID. The questions will be random, so a tanuki pretending to be him won’t be able to answer them.”

They would settle this before anyone noticed, so three men and women arrived in front of the metal door to check.

“Threaten him with your guns and knives. While he’s focused on those, I’ll zap him with my stun gun. Listen. Don’t spill any blood. That could prevent him from picking up the bag.”

They did not think this would be a difficult fight.

Their only worry was going too far and killing their opponent.

The three of them prepared their weapons and then kicked down the metal door.

And when they looked inside, they could not believe their eyes.

They saw two blond boys.

“Kh.”

They could not immediately tell which was the real one, so they made a quick decision.

“Get both of them!!”

With that shout, a woman charged toward the Jinnai Shinobu on the right. She pressed her stun gun against his thigh and hit the switch with her thumb.

She heard a loud zap, but she did not feel the attack land.

White smoke spread out and the boy transformed into a fox with a comical sound effect. To escape the stun gun’s electrodes, the Youkai fled toward the open exit while occasionally tripping.

“Don’t worry about him!!” shouted the woman. “Capture the true-…!!”

She trailed off because she saw a round tanuki slipping between the arms of the men grabbing at the Jinnai Shinobu on the left.

Both of them had been wrong.

In which case, where was the real Jinnai Shinobu?

“Dammit!! Was the first one who took the clothes the real one!?”

Part 26 (Day 10/04 09:40 - 09:52)

“Now, just to be sure, can you tell me your blood type?”

“AB. Thanks.”

After going through the necessary steps, I was at long last reunited with my suitcase. It was plastered with stickers of countless sizes, so there was no mistaking it.

I had been worried about my ID, but opening my cell and showing them the page displaying the monthly details was enough. They wouldn’t have accepted that normally, but they were probably more flexible with lost baggage since it was their mistake.

“Now, then.”

At the very least, I had avoided a scenario where I was killed as soon as I took the suitcase.

I had made it to the next phase and I still had a chance to save the Zashiki Warashi, but this didn’t exactly guarantee my safety.

I had tried to throw them off my trail to a certain extent, but I didn’t know how many more were inside the airport. For the time begin, I dragged the suitcase out of the airport building.

Once I entered the roundabout, I saw a familiar face.

It was the middle-aged driver of that white limousine taxi.

“Oh, what’s this? You look a lot more confident than yesterday. Did you win some at the casinos? Then how about driving on out to a beach filled with girls?”

“This isn’t Hawaii and I’m not about to go swimming in the ocean during October.”

“Well, I don’t know if it’s due to rising sea levels or what, but I hear the beaches have been getting smaller recently. Still, the casino city has a fully-indoor artificial beach. It runs year round like a ski slope in a desert.”

“Oh, yeah. Someone *had* left some swimsuits lying around.”

As I spoke, I climbed into the crazy-luxurious vehicle.

“Wait just a sec,” said the driver while messing with his cellphone. “I’ve gotta log out.”

I frowned.

“Oh, are you on the VR casino? Do you play the slots when you’re bored?”

“Of course not. I’d be broke in no time if I did that. The VR Casino City lets you make an avatar and buy a house or a shop. Just by putting your avatar’s old clothing up for sale, you’ll automatically get some virtual money.”

He finally stuck the phone in his pocket and smiled as he answered.

The limousine worked for me since it gave me the space to open the suitcase and it prevented anyone from grabbing it.

“Where to today?

“Just drive me around.”

“Wow, you’ve gotta be rich to say that. Did you really hit it big?”

While wildly setting off in the limousine taxi, the driver spoke casually to me.

“But be careful. Winning too much in a casino city isn’t always a fun thing. It can also earn you a lot of resentment.”’

“You mean a loser will stab me in the back?”

I kept the conversation going while pulling a small key from my wallet. It was for the suitcase.

The driver occasionally glanced back at me through the rearview mirror.

“It’s not just that. The locals won’t like you either.”

“?”

“Wait, really? You hadn’t noticed? Just to be clear, I’m not a local. I came here looking for work.”

He gave a deep laugh.

“In a casino city, all the brightly-lit buildings are built by outside corporations. I hear the truly local people really lose out in the deal.”

“But the inns and mine on the other side of the island make a lot of money, right? And aren’t the tours of the ruins popular?”

“Are you serious? While the locals do own the mine, outsiders from big companies ended up taking the mining rights by offering to lend them younger workers to keep the burden off the older locals. They tried to turn a remote island into an Intellectual Village, but they failed to keep control from the very beginning. All of the people born and raised on Goldmine Island only get a tiny fraction of the profit.”

“…”

“For a while now, the locals have been saying they suddenly couldn’t mine any gold anymore. I’m not sure how much truth there is to that, though.”

“Hm?”

“It seems work ships have been stopping in the harbor quite a bit and that they’re always loaded with a bunch of dirt that must have come from somewhere. The island’s miners claim it’s illegal mining and they suspect the casinos are digging up the island without giving even the bare minimum of notification.”

“But they aren’t actually running across new tunnels while working, right? Even if the casinos are digging somewhere, I don’t think it would change what the locals find in their usual mining spots.”

“Yeah, but when you hate someone, you hate everything about them. I mentioned the beaches shrinking due to rising sea levels, remember?”

“What about it?”

“The locals are blaming the casinos for that too. They claim all the electricity the casinos use is creating a bunch of carbon dioxide and advancing global warming.”

Well, yeah…

“That isn’t exactly wrong…”

“Gather enough dust and you’ll have a mountain, it’s true. But this little island alone isn’t going to affect the beaches. Unfortunately, the locals don’t really care about that kind of consistency. They refuse to forgive the people running the casinos or the guests who win a ton of money there. If you don’t want to get caught up in some kind of trouble, you shouldn’t show off even if you do win.”

So there was friction between the outside companies and the locals.

It wasn’t necessarily directly related to the problem I was facing, but it couldn’t hurt to know about the local power games.

And as I thought about that, I inserted the small key in the suitcase’s keyhole and unlocked it.

I found my vacation funds in an envelope, a few days’ worth of clothes, a handheld game system, a few games, an electric razor, my cellphone’s charger, and my nice underwear. I checked through it all, but I didn’t see anything someone would want badly enough to break the law. In fact, there was nothing in there I didn’t recognize.

“…?”

I packed it all up again.

Even if they were planning to slip something suspicious into someone’s suitcase, would they really unlock it and throw whatever it was inside? That seemed like too much effort for getting it in and back out again.

But my suitcase didn’t have any external pockets.

I locked it again and felt across its outside surface.

“Wait.”

I checked more carefully. Specifically, I began peeling off the countless stickers plastered all over it.

They all ripped as I pulled them off, except for one that came off as smoothly as a brand new sticker from its backing.

And something was hidden on the underside.

To prevent it from being crushed, they had carved a perfectly-sized groove in the side of the suitcase and a device about the size of a cheap lighter had been hidden inside the groove.

It was a USB memory stick with a red, translucent body.

“Is this it?”

Instead of a label, it had a small scrap of Japanese paper attached and serpentine writing seemed to slither along the surface. The writing was so sloppy that I couldn’t tell what it said, but I knew someone wanted it so badly that they were willing to use explosives and threats.

It would clearly act as a trump card.

I held up the USB memory stick and glared at it for a while, but I couldn’t see what was on it with a simple cellphone. I ended up sticking it in my pocket.

That was when my cellphone rang.

I answered the call from an unfamiliar number and was immediately greeted with the following words:

“Have you forgotten we have a hostage?”

“Not at all, and that’s why I felt the need for a plan. But thanks to that, I now hold what you want.”

“Then I wonder what we should do. Perhaps we should sever one of the hostage’s arms to prove we really can kill a Youkai.”

“I think burning an electronic device would be much easier,” I said in an intentionally low voice. “I don’t know what this is, but it’s obviously important to you. If I melt it down, you can’t fix it just by cooling it in the fridge. If you don’t want it to go to waste, then I’d stop looking down on me like that.”

The man on the phone fell silent for a while.

The sound of a scratching fingernail continued the entire time.

It lasted a few seconds or maybe around a dozen.

Finally, he responded.

“Do as you wish.”

That was all. He even hung up.

As I stared at the cell phone screen, the driver's voice reached me.

"Hey, we just entered the casino city, so where do you want to go now? Should I just take you around to the other side of the island?"

"No, let me off here," I said. "I'll pay you some extra, so take my suitcase to the Gold Crane."

I added an extra banknote as I paid and left the limousine taxi. I was in the same spot as the earlier car bombing. It was definitely dangerous, but anywhere would be dangerous on such a small island.

My mind focused on the crinkling of the old Japanese paper in my pocket.

That USB memory stick was my only lifeline.

Depending on how I used it, all of my efforts would pay off or be for nothing. It was the deciding factor.

"Now, then."

For a change of pace, I walked back behind a certain casino. The fox, tanuki, badger, and I had previously arranged to meet up here afterwards. It was the alley behind the casino where I had defeated Kodama Ryou.

By the time I got there, the fox and tanuki were already waiting.

"Where's the badger?"

"I doubt he was captured. No human can outrace us once we reach the mountains."

The normally-hesitant tanuki looked completely nonchalant as she said that, so it didn't seem to be a bluff. I couldn't sit still here and it looked like continuing on was my only option.

"What are we going to do now?" asked the fox.

"I found this."

I pulled out the contents of my pocket. The object was a little larger than a cheap lighter and looked like a USB memory stick with a red translucent body, but the label was made of Japanese paper and covered with serpentine writing.

"This is what they hid in my suitcase to carry in safely. It's also why they were attacking me and why they took the Zashiki Warashi hostage. It must be really important to them."

"That says Usuhiki Warashi."

"What?"

I frowned at what the tanuki said.

After all this, we were back to the Usuhiki Warashi? Wasn't that just what Kodama Ryou had used to swap out the cards?

The fox wagged his tail back and forth.

“What is this?”

“How should I know? All I know is that some people are willing to kill humans and Youkai to get their hands on it. That means I can definitely use it in an exchange for the Zashiki Warashi. But that will definitely fail if I let them continue to control what happens.”

For one thing, I only had the one small USB memory stick. If I was told to pack it in a plastic bag and wash it down the river or to place it in an envelope and mail it, I’d be out of luck. If I refused, they’d kill the Zashiki Warashi, but obeying wouldn’t bring her back.

I needed for the “exchange ceremony” to occur at the same time, in the same place, and in person.

“Just to be sure,” I said slowly. “You all can transform into people but not objects, right?”

“Yes. We can’t turn leaves into coins, so we can’t turn that Yu-Ess-Bee thing into something else or create a thousand fakes.”

If they could do that, they would have been able to handle things better during the poker game. Transforming into people was certainly enough, but it wasn’t all powerful.

“Th-then what do we do?”

“Fox, tanuki, two Youkai who can transform into someone else is enough.”

“Are you going to duplicate yourself to confuse them?”

“That’s an option,” I agreed. “But you can also transform into the Zashiki Warashi. If they’re monitoring us, they might begin to question whether their hostage is real or-…”

I trailed off because my cellphone rang.

“…”

The fox and tanuki fell silent too, so I answered the call and heard a voice that had become familiar by this point.

“Have you managed to cool your head?”

“I want to hear about the trade. How exactly are we going to do it?”

“I doubt you would agree to attach it to a balloon and release it into the sky.”

“If you insisted on that, I’d use a fake. You can buy cheap USB memory sticks at any convenience store, so I’d just transfer the label over and send that one.”

“Come to the ruins of the old mining days at the center of the island. We will not specify a time. We will know if you show up.”

“No forgetting anything. If I don’t see the Zashiki Warashi there, I’ll snap this thing in two.”

“Do as you wish. But be prepared for what that will mean.”

Just like in the limousine taxi, something didn’t seem quite right.

Even when I threatened to damage the USB memory stick, they didn’t threaten me in the slightest. Did they have a way of restoring functionality even if I destroyed it?

I glanced down at the translucent red device.

Should I check it on a computer and make a few copies of the data? But that could cause problems if it keeps an access log or if carelessly trying to view the data will automatically delete it.

I couldn't decide whether to rely on a trick or not.

But then I heard a small girl's shrieking voice. Rather than an urgent scream, it sounded more like a teasing shout.

Confused, I looked down the alley and saw a kimono-wearing girl of about twelve or thirteen running my way. She wore a short mini-yukata with her shoulders exposed like a courtesan. Overall, it looked like a tube top mini-dress and I knew who she was.

"The Usuhiki Warashi?"

She did not reply.

She continued shrieking as she ran past me and disappeared down the opposite end of the alley.

And…

"Wh-why…are you…here…?"

A man's voice seemed to rise from the depths of the earth and someone appeared with a rustling sound.

The man had been robbed of his regal appearance. The con artist's prized snakeskin suit was stained here and there and his hair was a complete mess. He looked like he had been beaten all over and thrown out with the trash. His face was badly swollen and he barely resembled the man I had seen before, but I could tell when I looked in his eyes.

"Kodama…Ryou?"

"Where did she go? My…my Youkai! She's supposed to bring me unlimited fortune!!"

Seeing the man shouting in confusion brought a weight to my chest.

This was the fate of those who were left behind.

He was one of those abandoned by a Zashiki Warashi or Usuhiki Warashi and thus forced to bear a fate of decline and ruin.

"I…"

He unsteadily approached.

Strangely, I found myself unable to move aside or back away. It was like having a snake looking you in the eye. He simply walked up to me as I held my cellphone and the USB memory stick.

“I wasn’t supposed to lose! I wasn’t supposed to lose here on Goldmine Island!! At the very least, I was never supposed to lose on this island!!”

“What…what are you talking about?”

I directly voiced my doubts, but he did not answer me.

He instead grabbed my shoulders using hands with filth crammed below the nails and he shook me violently.

“Was I abandoned? You’re with *them*, aren’t you? There’s no other way that system using the Usuhiki Warashi – a Zashiki Warashi subspecies – would fail! But that’s not possible. There’s no way that plan can succeed without me and my influence in so many different fields!! You’ve just chosen your own doom. But too bad. Now every last one of you will-…!!”

He never finished speaking.

His eyes suddenly rolled back in his head.

There was no time to say anything.

All strength left the hands grabbing my shoulders and the man fell limply toward me. Perhaps because his eyes had rolled back, I was no longer petrified like a snake was staring at me. And I felt no inclination to catch the con artist.

I stepped back.

With nothing supporting him, the snakeskin man collapsed to the dirty ground.

The tanuki gave a girlish scream, but I couldn’t even do that.

I simply stared blankly as Kodama Ryou’s limbs twitched. I was no longer looking at a human. This was merely an object.

Something like orange sparks scattered from his silenced mouth. I watched them rise toward the blue sky and seem to dissolve on the way.

“That was a Kechibi,” said the fox as he too looked up into the sky. “That was a Kechibi’s *feedback*.”

I wasn’t quite sure what he meant.

More importantly, the utterly unchanged voice coming from my cellphone seemed to squeeze at my heart.

“We will wait as long as it takes, but try to hurry.”

That cold voice seemed to be saying they would unilaterally and utterly eliminate anything that stood in their way.

The sound of his scratching fingernail sent my heart racing even faster.

“We can’t have you ruining everything with some amateur mistake.”

Part 27 (Day 10/04 10:00 – 10:15)

I called for the police and an ambulance, I didn't have time to sit around answering questions. We left right away, leaving the con artist's corpse behind.

"Does this mean the Usuhiki Warashi isn't the only Youkai they're using?" I asked while walking.

When Kodama Ryou had died, the fox had said it was a Kechibi's feedback.

"A Kechibi is a difficult Youkai," said the fox. "Unlike us, it has no actual body. According to witness accounts, it looks like…well, something like a Hitodama or Ikiryou."

"An Ikiryou? Isn't that like an out of body experience?"

"That is correct. They are souls of the living rather than of the dead. A living person's powerful resentment or longing removes just their soul – generally while they sleep – which will then harm people. However, it should be impossible unless the person undergoes extensive training or experiences a mutation."

"This Kechibi simply helps the process along. Maybe we should call it an invisible Youkai with the power to remove or release an Ikiryou from people's bodies."

I understood what they were trying to say.

This thing was off the charts when compared to the Zashiki Warashi or these animal Youkai. This one barely seemed like a living creature at all.

But…

"How does that let you kill people?"

"If a Kechibi is cut down with a sword, legend has it the person it belongs to will die a bizarre death, covered in blood. It's a lot like a form of feedback. The same things are said about normal Ikiryou, so the Kechibi that removed the soul probably doesn't matter. It must be the traits of the removed Ikiryou that matter."

After the fox's explanation, the wet nurse tanuki hesitantly opened her mouth.

"A-a Kechibi is supposed to appear when you rub the bottoms of your sandals together and call the person's name. If you could set up a system to summon the Youkai, call in the person's Ikiryou, cut it down, and kill the person…"

"You'd have an Ikiryou assassination Package to kill anyone you wanted, huh?"

It sounded like cursing someone with a straw doll.

But here, you didn't need one of their hairs and you didn't have to wait seven days and seven nights for it to take effect.

If they had free use of something like that, our chances shrank considerably. It might not work on Youkai like the fox and tanuki, but a human like me had almost no chance.

However…

“Doesn’t that seem odd?”

“How so?”

“They took the Zashiki Warashi hostage to control me, but if they had an Ikiryou assassination Package using a Kechibi, they wouldn’t need that. They could have just held my own life in their hands. Just because you have a way of killing Youkai doesn’t mean you want to have one around. That’s like living in a cage with a lion or tiger while armed with a hunting rifle. The second you turned your back, the beast could easily chomp down on you.”

Maybe they couldn’t activate it without meeting some complex conditions. Maybe it was like a cheap cellphone and it didn’t work if you took even a step inside a building. Maybe it cost way too much each time it was used.

I thought of a number of possibilities, but I had too little information.

I couldn’t find an answer as thing were, but I knew it was my life on the line.

“Speaking of strange things, Kodama Ryou said something odd.”

I was never supposed to lose on this island.

There’s no other way that system using the Usuhiki Warashi – a Zashiki Warashi subspecies – would fail.

You’re with *them*, aren’t you?

But too bad.

There’s no way that plan can succeed without me.

“He was acting odd from the beginning. Although it’s possible he was just confused and it was all meaningless.”

“It’s possible, but it still bothers me.”

Still, we didn’t have time to slowly find answers one at a time.

I wouldn’t be suspected of killing Kodama Ryou after he died in such a bizarre way, but it was true I had fled the scene. If the police caught up to me now, I would be stuck going through a long questioning. That meant I was being pursued by the police as well as the criminal group using the Usuhiki Warashi and Kechibi. I was also limited to this small island and I probably didn’t have much time left.

“Wh-what are you going to do now?” asked the wet nurse tanuki.

“There’s a lot I have to do, but let’s take care of it one at a time.”

Someone had died before my eyes.

I was just a high schooler, so if I let that hit home, my legs were sure to tremble and refuse to move. So I tried not to think about it too much while I spoke quickly to move things along.

“First up is the Zashiki Warashi. ”

Part 28 (Day 10/04 10:22 - 10:35)

As I walked deep into the forest, I spotted a group of boxy concrete buildings. I could see twenty to thirty of them from where I was, they had all grown dark and discolored, and they were covered with countless slug trails. No glass remained in the windows, but I couldn’t tell if it had been removed or just thoroughly broken.

I meaninglessly bent down a little and looked around while unsure if I was actually hidden by the trees or not.

“I don’t see any obvious guards. No cameras or sensors either.”

Of course, they weren’t about to put their security devices out where anyone could see them.

Whether due to her wild instincts or her love of nature as a Youkai, the tanuki had been full of life from the moment we entered the forest.

“I wonder which building the Zashiki Warashi is in.”

“I can’t tell from the sounds or smells,” said the fox while his ears twitched and his nose sniffed.

I crouched all the way down and exchanged a glance with the two Youkai.

“Okay, I’ll go on alone. You two hide in the forest and keep watch. You’re good at that, right? Don’t let them spot you.”

“Hey, young one.”

“If anything happens and it gets dangerous, grab the Zashiki Warashi and get out of here. Don’t worry about me. We still don’t know what conditions are needed to activate the Kechibi’s Ikiryou assassination Package. If they actually use that, I won’t be able to escape on foot. Even if I abandoned the Zashiki Warashi and tried to escape, the Kechibi’s remote attack would still kill me. So…”

“You saved our master and her granddaughter. Do you really think we can leave you to die?”

“Please,” I said quietly.

The fox groaned and refused to answer, but the tanuki hesitantly spoke up.

“U-um, Youkai like us generally don’t die, so how about we take that USB memory stick and try to negotiate in your place?”

“They have a method of killing a Zashiki Warashi. I’m guessing it’s a glass fiber knife or bullet made from a stone mill. The method won’t work on a fox or tanuki, but that isn’t the point. You understand, don’t you? Unlike the casino guards who just borrowed the method, these people have the skills to analyze a Youkai and build a countermeasure. They might just dispose of you two without batting an eye.”

In other words, it was possible they were similar to Hyakki Yakou.

If so, a Youkai's immortality wouldn't last and we couldn't rely on it.

But at the same time, their methods of killing Youkai had to be less convenient than the Kechibi's Ikiryou assassination Package. After all, they had needed to abduct the Zashiki Warashi before killing her. It wasn't like a cursed doll that could kill someone on the other side of the planet as easily as making an internet search.

In other words, if the fox and tanuki were killed right away, I would be killed too, no matter where I tried to run.

But if I was killed, those two still had some options open.

After explaining it all, I said the following:

"Let's get started."

"But…!!"

"I already explained this. Either way, they're already locked onto me. Even if I run away now, they can kill me whenever they want. …I just have to make sure this deal works out. You might be able to save me if you barge in partway through. The only situation that ensures my death is if I run away now. If we want even a 1% chance of victory, then we have to move forward."

With that said, I stood partway up and started walking.

With each step I took, the con artist's dying face flashed through my mind. This may have been what it felt like to enter a forest where a sniper lurked. However, I wasn't being targeted by bullets that could only fire in a straight line. My enemy was armed with something far more convenient and deadly.

Filling my lungs with air wasn't going to change anything, but I still lost control of my breathing.

I tried to calm it down and quiet it down, but the more I thought about it, the worse it got.

Someone in this forest and among the ruins was clearly after my life.

And as soon as that thought filled my mind…

"Dwahp!?"

My right leg caught on something and I tripped quite spectacularly. The fox and tanuki must have blended in with nature already because they didn't come running out. Of course, I didn't exactly want them causing a fuss just because I ahd tripped over a root.

But then I looked down at what I had tripped on and my throat immediately went dry.

It wasn't a root.

It was the corpse of young woman with her eyes rolled back in her head and foam spilling from her mouth.

Part 29 (Day 10/04 10:35 - 11:03)

The silence was deafening.

Neither the fox nor the tanuki screamed. They were either focused on blending into the forest or they simply hadn't noticed yet.

Either way, I was alone with the corpse.

That fact was incredibly disturbing.

"What…is this?"

I instinctually slid back along the ground while collapsed on my butt. I finally noticed the rustling of the leaves in the wind, but they sounded like eerie laughter to me. This sniper forest was so quiet and a mere high school boy had no way of knowing where the guards were posted, but that silence seemed to take on a whole new meaning.

I stood up in a crouch and ran to the nearest abandoned building.

With all of the furniture and equipment gone, it was nothing but an empty box and something seemed intensely wrong from the moment I set foot inside.

There were two more. A man and woman wearing janitor's uniforms lay unmoving near the center of the room. Not a drop of blood had been spilled. I didn't actually check their pulse, but I could tell. My mind automatically placed them in a category separate from a living human, so it was painfully obvious.

"What is this?"

I ran from the building and to another. On the way, I saw a few more corpses littering the ground. I didn't know how large the group had been, but a disturbing thought gradually seeped through my mind: there wasn't a single living human being here.

I checked a few other buildings, but all I found were more dead bodies: a man in a suit who seemed to have expired while climbing the stairs, a woman in a dress who seemed to have made a desperate attempt to leave through the window, etc., etc. Each time I found one, the weight of the silence seemed to double.

"What the hell is this!?"

Once I could no longer bear the weight, I cried out.

Who were they? Who had killed them? What had happened to the Zashiki Warashi? Weren't the villains controlling the Usuhiki Warashi and the Kechibi and wasn't I supposed to solve the mystery and rescue the Zashiki Warashi!?

My greatest enemy had already been destroyed, but I couldn't exactly rejoice. I felt like I was only now realizing that something far worse was underway.

That was when I heard a footstep.

"!?"

It didn’t come from outside. Someone was descending the stairs inside the building. That meant it probably wasn’t the fox or tanuki and it was even less likely to be a survivor of this group. So who else could it be?

“The Zashiki…Warashi?” I muttered.

It was mostly wishful thinking, but it started to feel more realistic as soon as I said it.

I wasn’t being naïve or overly hopeful.

A bunch of corpses. A Youkai as the sole survivor. A being that could not be killed by normal means. Even if she was categorized as harmless, bullets and blades were meaningless to her and she could not be easily stopped if she did grow violent.

The footsteps continued.

Something was definitely approaching me.

Was it possible she had done this? What if they had been bluffing about having a way to kill Youkai or what if it was difficult to activate in a hurry? How far would the Youkai’s counterattack spread? Once they thoughtlessly claimed to have a way of killing her, she wouldn’t have been able to calmly assume she would survive no matter what happened. She would have to put up a thorough fight to secure her safety.

What if that was what had happened?

“…”

Unpleasant sweat poured down my face.

My eyes were drawn toward the stairs and my body wouldn’t move.

These footsteps would mean a reunion, but I could also feel something changing inside me.

Step.

Step, step.

Step, step, step.

Step, step.

And finally, a familiar voice reached me from the stairs.

“Shinobu?”

I think I must have screamed some nonsense that clearly wasn’t Japanese.

To be honest, the color white exploded deep in my mind and I couldn’t remember anything afterwards. But I think I must have tried to run from the stairs with my eyes still glued to them. And as soon as I awkwardly started moving backwards, my heel caught on something and I landed on my butt. But instead of hard concrete, I felt something softer. When I realized it was another corpse, I screamed again.

I felt like a fish out of water that had finally made it back to the fish tank only to find the tank was filled with sulfuric acid. I have no idea how I moved my muscles, but I somehow managed to jump up and move away from the corpse.

Meanwhile, the Zashiki Warashi with black hair flowing across her red yukata tilted her head a little, shaking her hair a bit in the process.

“What are you doing? Don’t tell me you took a turn for the truly disturbed and were trying to kiss that dead body.”

“Eh? What?”

My mind went blank yet again.

I had assumed a crazed killer Youkai was approaching, but it was the same Good-for-Nothing Youkai as always.

“Wait. How…why…?”

“Oh, they had me tied up, but I got out on my own. The rope was made so a Zashiki Warashi couldn’t break it, but it didn’t have a curse that kept me from moving or anything.”

She rubbed together the rope marks on her wrists.

“Did you know that the standard way to slip free of a rope is to create a gap? For example, if you press your palms together and move your arms apart when they tie your wrists, you can make a gap between your wrists and the rope just by squeezing your arms back together. I didn’t really believe it when I heard it, but I tried it and it worked pretty well.”

Then I saw something like orange embers floating from the mouth of the corpse I had tripped on.

“Is this from the Kechibi’s Ikiryou assassination Package?”

“I don’t know. They just all started collapsing around me. Youkai can’t be killed by normal means, so I thought maybe some gas had leaked from the mine.”

“…”

What in the world is going on?

The Usuhiki Warashi and Kechibi were supposed to belong to the enemy, so was this infighting within the group that had kidnapped the Zashiki Warashi? Or had they lost control of the Package?

“Hey, Indoor Youkai.”

“I see you’re skipping right past the emotional reunion. What is it?”

“Do you know how many people were here?”

“Not exactly. About twenty maybe?”

That led to some depressing work.

I decided the threat had passed for the time being, so I called out to the forest. The fox and tanuki showed up immediately. They naturally freaked out when they saw the corpses, but I had no time to deal with that. From there, we split up and got to work. We dragged over all of the corpses and gathered them inside a single building.

We found even more than reported. There were twenty-four and there was no guarantee we had found them all. It was possible more victims existed in the forest somewhere.

By this point, my senses had numbed over.

I dug through their pockets and gathered their wallets and cellphones.

“Based on his license, he’s a local. Of course, this could be a fake.”

“Hm? Wait just a second. The ruffian at the airport was a local too, wasn’t he?”

“Shinobu, this one is too. I’m guessing they all are.”

The limousine taxi driver had mentioned friction between the locals and the outside companies that had turned Goldmine Island into a casino city. It was looking like that was the situation here.

“Anything concerning the Kechibi Package? It would be a bad idea to ignore that. While it looks pretty unlikely there are any survivors, someone else might pick it up. I’d like to destroy it if possible.”

“I don’t see anything like that.”

The fox was exactly right.

The corpses only had wallets, cellphones, and dangerous-looking knives or stun guns. We couldn’t find anything that might be a controller to or component of a Package. Of course, it might have been something that blended in so perfectly that an amateur couldn’t tell.

“Shinobu.”

The Zashiki Warashi cut in after the tanuki explained things.

“Have you considered the possibility that your initial assumption was wrong? In other words…”

“The Kechibi Package is used by someone else entirely and they’re just the victims?”

My vision very nearly went dark.

If that was true, what had we gotten ourselves caught up in? This was completely different from the plan to use the Zashiki Warashi as a way to get the USB memory stick from my suitcase. It would mean Kodama Ryou had been killed before my eyes for some other reason entirely. Would it now bare its fangs toward us? Or wouldn’t it? I had nothing to go on there, so I just had to give up.

I searched their phones, still hoping I would find something. Most of them were password locked and I couldn’t do anything with them, but a few of them had been more careless. I checked through those phones that had not been set up properly.

Oh.

“What is it, Shinobu?”

“Um…wait. Fox, a Kechibi is similar to an Ikiryou and it’s something like a human soul that leaves a living person, right? And if they cut it with a sword, the distant person will be injured in the same way and might even die?”

“Yes. What about it?”

“Tanuki, but didn’t you say you can call in a Kechibi by rubbing sandals together and calling the person’s name?”

“Y-yes. They must use a Kechibi to remove an Ikiryou from a specified human, summon it, cut it, and kill them. And they would have an Ikiryou assassination Package that uses that process.”

“I might have figured out how.”

They all tried to look at the (victim’s) cellphone. Although, it seemed too much to ask for the fox and tanuki to stand up that tall.

“The sandals are probably a metaphor for the person’s footsteps. You follow their footsteps, reach them, and kill them. In that case, they need those ‘footsteps’ to identify the target, but it doesn’t necessarily have to be actual tracks on the ground.”

The Zashiki Warashi seemed to catch on first.

“Shinobu, are you saying their internet history counts as their footsteps?”

“Close but not quite.” I lightly waved the cellphone. “The answer is probably big data.”

“Big data?” asked the fox. “Enough of those Western words!!”

“Isn’t that a method of gathering lots of information without specifying the individuals?” suggested the tanuki. “I heard on the news that they can automatically tell what people are buying at train station vending machines and stuff like that.”

“This phone’s GPS was on. Or rather, they didn’t check over their contract very well and it can’t even be turned off. I think there was a notice about this in the inn’s entranceway. In addition to the normal casinos, this island has an online VR casino called Heavy Cruiser Island. But to make sure you can only use the gambling app on the island, you have to agree to give them your location.”

“But.” The Zashiki Warashi shrugged. “Isn’t big data set up so they can’t tell who it came from? If everyone was identified with a number, I think everyone would be too creeped out to go anywhere near Goldmine Island.”

“With only one kind of data, sure.”

I tossed aside the dead man’s phone and pulled out my own.

“But they just have to gather several different kinds. For example, just knowing where a taxi picked up and dropped off a customer doesn’t tell you who that customer was, but if you add in vending machine surveillance cameras, a store’s

point card usage history, and other types of data, you can figure out who used the taxi when and where. You can bring the data back to its original form.”

“But that would mean…”

“I don’t know if they’re actually using different kinds of big data to find an individual, but I bet the enemy has rigged a huge server or base station so they can pull out all its data. …Hey, Zashiki Warashi. Turn off my smartphone right now. I don’t know how exactly they’re locating people, but a phone is a collection of personal information. Sealing that should buy some time.”

“No, not that.”

Just as I hurriedly started to turn off my cellphone, the Zashiki Warashi cut me off.

I looked confused.

“What is it?”

“Doesn’t that make this Kechibi Package pretty inconsistent and unreliable as a way of killing people?”

“?”

I didn’t know what she getting at.

Even if the target did nothing, they could gather different kinds of data, select their target out of the 150 million people in the country, and kill them. Once they fished out an individual from the great sea of big data, they were ready to go. It didn’t matter if the person fled to the other side of the world and holed up in a nuclear shelter, so how much more reliable could it be?

But the Zashiki Warashi gave a simple answer.

“This wouldn’t do anything against the oddities that don’t have a cellphone.”

The situation did not even wait for the chill to run down my back.

Suddenly, I heard several dry gunshots ring from a building to the side.

Part 30 (Day 10/04 11:03 - 11:17)

Someone was still alive.

The repeated gunshots were enough to tell me that.

“…Ah…”

I truly thought I had died as the deafening sound reached my ears and my vision grew white. The world seemed to fade into the distance and I felt pain squeezing at my heart.

But then someone grabbed my right shoulder.

I was pulled back with the great force of heavy machinery and the white world around me shattered. In its place, the red of the Zashiki Warashi's yukata stepped in front of me.

I heard several blasts like small explosives had gone off under her skin, but she did not cry out.

Her yukata tore in places, but she did not shed a drop of blood.

That was what it meant to be a Youkai.

Her body was shaped the same as a human's, but its structure was entirely different.

The tanuki supported my unsteady body as I watched the Zashiki Warashi move toward the source of the gunfire. She did not think about defending or evading. She simply walked forward.

"Eek!?"

I heard a panicked shriek. I couldn't see past the Zashiki Warashi, but it sounded a lot like the voice I had heard on the phone.

The Zashiki Warashi did not speak a word.

Without even running, she walked forward and grabbed the collar of the person holding a handgun in his hands. She then threw him. It looked a lot like someone tossing a trash bag with one arm, but the adult man flew five meters through the air, slammed back-first into a dirty concrete wall, and fell to the floor. The tremendous sound it caused may have been even more violent than the gunshots.

"Gh…ghe…g-gh…ah…! D-damn…damn you!!"

It was a young man.

He groaned and struggled to breathe while reaching a hand across the concrete floor.

Don't tell me.

He spoke like he knew who I was and *I recognized his voice despite never having met him before.*

But before I could think, he grabbed the gun he had dropped and exchanged the magazine for one marked with a different fluorescent color.

The dry gunshots were met by bursts of red liquid.

It was fresh blood.

That Youkai could stand tall as a bomb went off nearby, but this had injured her.

Most likely, these bullets had been made with the glass fiber created from crushing a stone mill which was deeply linked to the legends of the Zashiki Warashi. Dark red holes had appeared from her right thigh to her stomach as if someone had taken a giant sewing machine to her.

But…

"…"

Her expression did not change in the slightest.

She continued to walk forward, crouched down, and grabbed the fallen man's shoulders.

She then swung him around in a horizontal circle and let go to throw him.

This time, he flew from one end of the building to the other. And fast enough that the Doppler effect was noticeable in his scream. After the disturbing sound of something soft being crushed, the young man fell to the floor again and his gun flew far away from him. He wasn't even screaming anymore. Still, his hand squirmed. He had given up on the gun and instead pulled something like a large barber's razor from his pants.

And that meant the Zashiki Warashi could not stop either.

She threw him.

And threw him.

And threw him.

"Hey, fox. Or the tanuki."

The next thing I knew, I was speaking.

"Just hold that man down. Restrain him! If you don't that Good-for-Nothing Youkai will kill him!! Hurry!!"

I knew I was just about screaming and the two animals finally reacted. They were caught in the Zashiki Warashi's violence on the way and were sent bouncing around, but they still managed to hop onto the collapsed man's back. That kept him from moving.

"It's over!" I shouted. "It's over now, Zashiki Warashi!! So you can stop!!"

"…"

"It" turned toward me with the movements of an automaton that needed oil.

The inhuman look in her eyes threatened to instantly destroy a relationship of over ten years.

"Ah…gh…"

I heard a gurgling sound as the man on the floor opened his mouth.

His mouth was dyed red and most of his teeth seemed to have broken, but he did something other than complain about the pain.

“Hand it…over.”

At first, I didn’t know what he meant, but it soon came to me like I was gradually solving a puzzle.

“Hand it over. Hand over the final piece you have!! Gbgh!? That isn’t something you should have!!”

“Why not?”

I pulled the translucent red USB memory stick from my pocket, stared at it, and asked again.

“Why do you want this so badly!? Is it really worth trying to kill someone or almost getting killed yourself!?”

“You…don’t…don’t understand…anything…”

The bloody man might have even broken his back, but the look on his face changed as soon as he saw the USB memory stick. He was still pinned down, but he stretched his hand and its broken nails out toward me. Not only that, he began dragging himself along the ground despite having the fox and tanuki on top of him.

His persistence made me back away.

I knew he really cared about the device, but so what? I didn’t know how it affected their Package, but it had to just be a way of making easy money. A fortune was only useful when you were alive. Not only had his partners in crime and subordinates lost their lives, but he was wearing away his own life. Why did he want it that badly? How could he go this far?

However, it turned out I was looking at it all wrong.

“If we don’t do something soon, *unrelated people will be dragged into this*!!”

……
……Eh?

My assumptions were falling apart.

I stared down at the object in my hands.

“What you…what you all unknowingly carried to this island was the final safety needed to stop the destruction that is already underway!! I…*We* knew the secret, so we had to stop it!! And yet…!!”

After abducting the Zashiki Warashi, the villains had ordered me to bring them the suitcase.

Yet when I threatened to destroy the USB memory stick I found, they didn’t provide much of a reaction.

But…

They weren't the end of this? There's some other, larger plan and they were in a position to stop it?

Wasn't that something we had concluded not long before?

There were two sets of villains on Goldmine Island. One was the group that had kidnapped the Good-for-Nothing Zashiki Warashi and used the Usuhiki Warashi, a Zashiki Warashi subspecies. The other was a different group that used the Kechibi's Ikiryou assassination Package.

In that case, which group had hidden the strange USB memory stick on my suitcase so I would carry it onto the island?

Which of the two plans would it benefit?

"What?" I asked without thinking. "What did I bring onto this island? What is this thing!?"

"Hurry up…and use it."

The collapsed man reached out with his bloody hand and spoke quietly.

"That is a method of inducing national suicide. We happened to stumble onto the system. We tried to use it for ourselves, but someone interfered. Hurry, hurry! If you don't drive that wedge into the gears of destruction and stop them from turning, the entire nation of Japan will be wiped from the map!!"

The man seemed very confused and I had trouble following what he was saying.

Plus, I wasn't given time to think about it.

A moment later, some overwhelming violence interrupted us.

Part 31 (Day 10/04 11:17 - 11:40)

What…happened?

It took me quite a long time to catch on.

"…"

Everything looked turned on its side, but that was because I had collapsed onto my side. Also, a nearby concrete wall had been destroyed to the point I thought a dump truck had crashed into it. The wet feeling in my hair told me a basketball-sized chunk had hit me.

There was nothing we could do.

The fox couldn't do anything, the tanuki couldn't either, and not even the Zashiki Warashi could despite how ferocious she had grown.

Someone had stepped in through the crumbling wall and knocked those three down just by swinging his arm. The rules said Youkai couldn't be harmed by normal means, but that no longer applied. They were punched, they were kicked, and they were thrown away. That was the kind of primitive violence that ruled the world here.

“Hm. Is that all?”

After seeing a growing pool of blood approaching the USB memory stick that had fallen to the floor, the person silently crouched down and picked it up.

The person was a gray-haired man who appeared to be in his fifties.

He was not Japanese. He was clearly white and his graying hair had likely been a lovely blond originally. Even on the subtropical island, he wore a thick military-style coat that fit him perfectly. He also wore leather gloves.

“Who…are you…?”

“Now, then. Where should I begin? Would the term Kechibi be enough to tell you I’m not with them?”

The gray-haired man dutifully answered my question as I remained on all fours.

Shortly thereafter, I heard a roar. The altogether bloody young man (from the Usuhiki Warashi group) stood up wielding a handgun and did not hesitate to pull the trigger. Sharp gunshots quickly filled the enclosed space.

But the gray-haired man did not seem to mind.

He took a casual action much like a child jokingly performing a lariat, but that was all it took to smash the building’s thick loadbearing column. A gray deluge poured down with tremendous force and swept outside the building, taking the bullets and the bloody pulp with it.

It was hard to believe a normal human had done that.

The gray-haired man’s shadow wavered and the number of arms on the shadow grew to four.

“So this is the Obou-Jikara. It sounded like a musty old legend, but ‘when in Rome’ as they say.”

You’re…kidding.

That was related to the story of a Youkai called the Ubume.

An Ubume looked like a young woman holding a baby on the roadside. She would ask passersby to hold the baby, but then the baby would grow heavier and heavier and eventually crush whoever had agreed. The Ubume was a deadly Youkai.

However, anyone who managed to continue holding the baby to the end was said to obtain superhuman strength known as Obou-Jikara. It had looked like his shadow had grown four arms, but did that mean what I thought it did?

Humans could not kill Youkai, but what if the power they used relied on a Youkai? Did that mean he could take down even the Zashiki Warashi on her rampage?

“You are right to feel fear. Humans have a bad habit of glorifying those who struggle against fear to the point of numbing themselves to it, but fear is a biological signal telling you to avoid some kind of danger. It is best to obey it.”

As he spoke, the gray-haired man raised the translucent red USB memory stick and checked to see if any blood had gotten on it.

Not good.

This cannot be good.

“It all began with a certain turning point for this nation. Once your precision machinery industry suffered a decisive loss, you entered a period of chaos as you shifted to the ultra-high precision primary industries…aka running Intellectual Villages.”

“…”

“At the time, fear filled the nation of Japan. You had lost your economic superiority and the economic foundation began shifting to China, Korea, and other southeastern Asian nations. Investors lost faith in the yen and moved their money elsewhere and the foreign companies fled the Tokyo Stock Exchange for fear of being caught in the middle when the nation went bankrupt. Japan knew it would be abandoned, which would be fatal for a nation with less than 30% self-sufficiency for food. That was why those in power reversed their thinking. If they created a system that did not allow anyone to abandon them, they could continue to prosper. That was the way they saw it.”

This was so sudden that I honestly couldn’t keep up.

However, that wasn’t due to the gray-haired man. The scale of the issue had just grown so large. And I felt like a fool for not realizing it.

“Oh, the system itself was simple enough. The basic traits of an Usuhiki Warashi aren’t that different from those of a Zashiki Warashi. The main point is that they bring fortune and prosperity to the house they live in. Boy, do you know the currency used during the Edo period when the story of the Usuhiki Warashi and Zashiki Warashi spread?”

“Wait…a second.”

“The Oban and the Koban, both of which are symbolized by gold. And where else is gold used besides for decorations and currency?”

“Are you talking about integrated circuits and cable ports?”

“The Usuhiki Warashi can control pure gold. And by moving a piece of gold thinner than a hair only half a millimeter, one can prevent hardware from making contact and *destroy* the data passing through that hardware. And if copper coins are included too, the range of effects grows considerably. But regardless, this applies to hard disks, flash memory, and even the magnetic tape reels that big data companies have been returning to. After that, it is no different from ballistic missile defense. They need only say the following to the world’s investors who were protecting their assets with the Japanese yen: ‘During the next few years while Japan gets back on its feet, if we detect anyone transferring a significant amount of money out of Japan, we will destroy the Tokyo Stock Exchange hardware corresponding to the cluster of data belonging to that individual. Those deals are carried out in less than a millisecond and intentionally slowing them could put you hundreds of millions of dollars in the red, so it would be best to cooperate with us.’ …I suppose you could call it a new form of intimidation diplomacy.”

That was the original form of an old system.

But in modern times, that relic was no longer needed. The country had already recovered using the ultra-high quality brand-name vegetables of the Intellectual Villages.

“The islanders who attacked you had likely unearthed that old system somehow or another. And they were thinking of a way to use it. The automatic detection of large sums of money being transferred was likely what they wanted. Maybe they wanted to copy the movements of big-name investors and win big in the stock market or maybe they wanted to sabotage the trading data of the VIPs enjoying the casinos. To be honest, that would hinge on whether their goal was profit or revenge.”

“Then…”

Still on the floor, I desperately moved my lips and spoke in a groan.

If I didn’t do that and keep my focus on the outside world, I probably would have passed out.

“What are you trying to do by slaughtering them?”

“That is simple!! Just think of it as upping the scale a little.” The gray-haired man spread his arms. “Japan was in such a pitiful state back then, but you got back on your feet thanks to your hard work. It may look like your economy is focused on the agriculture of the Intellectual Villages, but it is high-quality industrial technology that supports those villages. Once Japan’s computer technology won back the world’s trust, many nations adopted it for their financial trading systems. Which means?”

“…”

My mind went blank.

It wasn’t that I couldn’t come up with an answer. It was that the idea in my head was just too ridiculous.

But the nightmarish answer still came.

“The Package for small-scale hardware damage using an Usuhiki Warashi was limited to Japan, but it can now spread through the high-speed circuits and around the globe. Billions of dollars change hands each millisecond and all of that stock trading will be cut off for about seven days. That would be a fatal blow to the world. The former bursting of the bubble will seem like nothing in comparison.”

He wasn’t trying to spread chaos.

He wasn’t trying to make someone lose something.

“You mean…you’re trying to…?”

“It would be one thing if it was a true accident, but if a system built by Japan destroys Japan’s own devices, responsibility will naturally fall on Japan. Unlike data or software, it is easy to add up a sum of damages with physical hardware. Now, what will happen to Japan then? I predict it will be put on a very good sale indeed.”

He was talking about the sale of Japan, the hijacking of an entire nation.

“This device itself is quite simple.”

He sounded amused as he waved the USB memory stick.

That was the key to it all and the source of it all.

“Would a high school boy know what a hardware key is? Instead of using a password, an exceedingly complex formula is stored on flash memory and used as the key to prevent illegal access. They are fairly common for online banking or stock trading.”

“What…about it? What does that hardware key give you access to? What does it have to do with what you were talking about!?”

“Ha ha. It’s simple. Goldmine Island has constructed a giant virtual city around their VR casino. Avatars can move freely about, buy land or buildings, and open up stores to sell ‘used clothing’ for the avatars. It is nothing but a form of entertainment, but this is an access key for one portion of it. It gives you free access to a room not accessible any other way. It is a child’s room filled with toys and candy.”

An avatar shop in the virtual city.

A virtual children’s room filled with candy and toys.

Don’t tell me…

“It would seem you have figured it out.” The gray-haired man seemed to be enjoying himself. “Just like the Zashiki Warashi, the Usuhiki Warashi is a Spirit composed of the children killed to conserve food during a famine. And in the mountain villages of Tohoku, it is said people would intentionally create children’s rooms for them so they would stay longer and protect that family. That idea was virtually recreated and the Usuhiki Warashi is controlled by rearranging the zeroes and ones composing the room’s layout as well as the arrangement and numbers of toys and candy. And this is the controller key that provides administrator access. No key is needed to enjoy an online game like normal, but it is needed to correct a bug or add additional features. Now do you understand the link between their Package, the Usuhiki Warashi, and this USB hardware key?”

The man added that there was of course a “delete” command that would cause the entire system built around the Usuhiki Warashi to fail and fall apart.

“To put it simply, this USB hardware key provides complete control of the Usuhiki Warashi. Long ago, this Usuhiki Warashi was closely related to that national suicide system, so it can do quite a bit. It truly can destroy Japan, but it can also crush the entire national suicide system at the flip of a switch.”

“So it can be used as a self-destruct switch for that extremely dangerous Package?”

“Ha ha. What a lovely comparison! Perhaps I should use it in the future. The islanders who unearthed the system *while imagining they were some secret organization* seemed to have moved just this hardware key elsewhere. It was likely to prevent one of their own from betraying them and hijacking the Usuhiki Warashi, but they eventually began to wonder what would happen if a foreign force like us happened to steal the hardware key.”

“…”

“That was why they snuck it back onto the island to ensure its safety. They didn’t want anyone else to get their hands on it and they wanted to maintain stable control of the Usuhiki Warashi at the core of the national suicide system that they had started to lose control of. Of course, this is only a nuisance to someone like me who actually wants the suicide to occur. It is fortunate I managed to retrieve it before it was used. …If I destroy it, nothing can stop the system from running out of control. This is all I needed to declare checkmate.”

“…….
…….You’re…kidding.”

“Of course not. This is what I was after.”

As he spoke, the man broke the USB memory stick in two, dropped it to the floor, poured a can of lighter fluid over it, and set it ablaze.

I had been wrong.

I doubted this gray-haired man was right about the dead group’s reason for abducting the Zashiki Warashi to get the hardware key.

It may have begun with that kind of greed or desire for revenge, but they had eventually noticed a greater evil and they had tried to put a stop to it. They had wanted to get that USB memory stick even if that meant destroying the Package they had built.

And…

I…got in their way?

“No, that can’t be true.”

My shaky voice rejected the man’s words.

Or rather, I *wanted* to reject them any way I could.

“No matter how much I threatened to destroy the hardware key over the phone, they didn’t react! If it really was the safety they needed to stop that national suicide system, they would have…”

“Ha ha ha!! That was obviously just an act so you wouldn’t realize what they were after. They were probably sweating bullets every time you shouted at them over the phone.”

There was nothing more.

My pathetic denial just wasn’t enough.

“Now, nothing remains to stop me,” said the man. “There is no spare hardware key, so it shouldn’t take long before the national suicide is complete.”

With that said, he turned around and made his way outside.

He was escaping out through the giant hole he himself had made.

“Wait!! Who even are you!?”

“You will know before long. You are a student, aren’t you? Then just look up at the flag flying in front of your school. Before long, you will see something other than a red circle there.”

“You…”

I tried to draw his attention.

It may have been meaningless. We had already lost the hardware key needed to access the virtual children’s room that controlled the Usuhiki Warashi. Even if I tore out the gray-haired man’s windpipe with my teeth, there was no stopping the national suicide.

But for some reason, I desperately called out to him.

Yes, that’s right.

I didn’t have an actual idea in mind.

I was simply afraid of being left behind.

“Why are you letting me live?”

“Ha ha!!”

The man laughed loudly, but he did not stop walking or even look back.

He kept his back to me as he answered with laughter in his voice.

“Why would I kill you? The more slaves the better.”

That was all.

There was nothing I could do.

I could not even get up from the floor as the gray-haired man vanished from the abandoned building.

Part 32 (Day 10/04 12:00 – 12:30)

Some kind of conclusion was reached without my knowledge.

Part 33 (Day 10/04 12:30 – 13:09)

“We will be interrupting this program for some breaking news. Today at noon, accidental explosions occurred in chemical complexes in Kitakyushu, Hiroshima, Fukui, Kobe, Yokkaichi, Kawasaki, coastal Chiba, Kashima, Sendai, and Hakodate. Police have announced that they are investigating it as a possible large-scale cyber attack rather than simple accidents. Currently, the firefighters are working valiantly to put out the fire, but the situation does not look good. Anyone living in the neighboring areas are urged not to go outside to view the disaster. Inhaling the chemical smoke would be very dangerous. And even those who live outside the specified areas should avoid going outside if at all possible. Many dangerous chemicals are continuing to escape and the Meteorological Agency says the winds will carry them across the entire country. …Oh, we have just received more

information. Similar explosions and leaks have been confirmed at 192 of the country's chemical factories and storage facilities. The number of casualties is unknown at this time. We will announce the locations once a list of names has been confirmed. The government has begun an emergency meeting of the Cabinet and decided to create a countermeasures team. Chief Secretary Nakaue of the ruling party is strongly urging the nation to wait for a definite announcement and not to follow dangerous speculation. …I'm sorry. We have even more new information. We have just received word that heavy tankers cruising near Japan are bursting into flames one after another. No accurate number is known. We will provide more detailed information once it is available. The Ministry of the Environment made an announcement a moment ago. They are rapidly performing water quality tests around the country and will resume drawing water once its safety has been confirmed. Anyone who uses a well rather than the water service, please avoid drawing drinking water if at all possible. Foreign websites are already expressing their doubts about the brand-name image of Japanese agricultural produce, so the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries will soon make an announcement to sweep away such speculation. I repeat: please do not do anything until more accurate information has been announced. Large traffic jams covering more than fifty kilometers have been confirmed on Kitakyushu Expressway, Hanshin Expressway, Tomei Expressway, Shuto Expressway, Kan-Etsu Expressway, Joban Expressway, Tohoku Expressway, and other major roads. Attempting to flee the contaminated regions exposes you to the possibility of breathing in chemicals from the atmosphere, so please stay indoors. More new information? This time, large explosions have been confirmed in oil storage companies in Kitakyushu, the Seto Inland Sea, and Aomori. The number of casualties is not known at this time. Details will be provided when they are available. The Meteorological Agency just released a satellite image. The Japanese archipelago is almost entirely covered by black clouds, but it seems they are all some form of contaminating…"

Part 34 (Day 10/04 13:09 – 13:30)

I was in a complete daze.

The news coming from the inn's TV was all so insane that it didn't feel remotely real.

Almost the entire Japanese archipelago had been covered in pollutants like someone had filled in a coloring book picture.

Heavy footsteps had been stomping around behind me for a while. My parents were constantly trying to contact someone, but the phone lines were so overloaded they couldn't get through. Their voiceless impatience seemed to point to the enormity of the situation.

The country had struck a nice balance with the ultra-high quality agricultural produce supported by the Intellectual Villages, but that was all coming to an end.

I couldn't quite grasp what that meant.

"Now that the national suicide system has been used, the nation of Japan will be sold off to other countries before long. There was not a single thing we could do to stop it."

A young girl's voice reached my ear.

For some reason, I held a cellphone to that ear.

Odd. I thought the phones weren't getting through?

"The nation of Japan's value will drop to zero and anything remotely useful will be stripped away, so acquiring us will mean taking on a massive debt. Pointing that out was the only way we had to drive back the buyers."

I recognized the voice.

It was the girl who led the large organization named Hyakki Yakou.

"We have established that none of Japan's land or the nearby seas will be fully decontaminated until nearly fifty years from now. Advances in technology should shorten that somewhat, but for the time being, no one can set foot on this land. The environment will become unlivable without wearing a spacesuit. No matter how low the island nation's value may have dropped, no buyer will want to take on the cost of a fifty year decontamination. In that time, we must reconstruct the power needed to take back the nation we have lost."

That was when it all finally came into focus.

Oh, I get it.

This is what happens after we were put in checkmate and the game is already over.

"Jinnai Shinobu. You need to leave this country immediately. It does not matter where you go, but you need to lie low until the time comes to buy back the country."

I still held the phone to my ear, but her voice no longer reached me.

Instead, thoughts raced through my mind.

My eyes met those of the Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata. That Youkai shared a house's prosperity, silently watched it rise, and left as a sign of its decline. She simply stood there like always. Except this time, she was watching our ruin.

That told me that this was the end.

We would be leaving here. In the worst case, we would be unable to leave and we would die here, but if we were to survive, we needed to work toward leaving the country.

But Youkai were different. No matter how bad the environment got, they could live like normal. And I doubted a Japanese Youkai formed from Japan's environment would be able to cross the national borders.

"I will be back."

So this was the end.

So this was goodbye.

"I won't give up on you!! No matter how many years or decades it takes, I *will* be back!! So…!!"

There was nothing I could do.

On that day, our story came to a complete stop.

Part 35 (3rd person — Day ??/?? ??:?? - ??:??)

Kotemitsu Madoka thought about how much time had passed since then.

The large meeting room of New York's UN Headquarters building was normally only seen on the news, so it was a strange sight for a normal person like her to be standing there. Regardless, she did not feel overwhelmed.

She knew that those with true influence did not attend meetings in places seen on television. She also knew that she herself had transformed into one of those with true influence.

It was currently two in the morning, so it was an extremely unusual time for a meeting.

Nevertheless, all of the seats for all of the member nations were filled. They all knew just how much they stood to lose by not being here.

Madoka stood in the center of the circular meeting and she spoke.

"How about we finally settle this?"

She challenged the world with a microphone in one hand.

"That was a message from 'him'. 'He' said it, so don't you think it is about time the world began to act? …I am sure you have already realized that, if we continue to stagnate by failing to think, we will shrivel up and die."

Despite her disrespectful way of speaking, the listeners immediately took it all in.
I've gotten pretty good at giving speeches over the last ten years, noted Madoka.

"We have easily used up all of this planet's resources: oil, rare earths, water, and even food. Yes, we kept thinking the oil would continue to last a little longer, but we are truly seeing the bottom there. And unfortunately, we now know the moon contains far fewer resources than we had hoped and we are still a long way off from manned mining of Mars. So what are we to do?"

She looked around at them all.

The surrounding listeners all gave her distressed looks. These were their true faces that they could never show the TV cameras for fear of creating social unrest.

"Currently, unmanned robots are the foundation of our space development technology. That is how we designed it. And 'he' is the leading individual in that field. Without exaggeration, 'he' can be found at the source of almost every theory there. And 'he' has found an answer. This is undoubtedly the correct method."

The listeners were drawn in half by Madoka's eloquence and half by 'his' name.

"The moon is insufficient and we are a long way from manned mining within the gravity of Mars. That is why we have set our sights on the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter. Those countless asteroids are made of ice and minerals. First, we will fire missiles there with your cooperation. And when the many asteroids are

swept toward the Earth, we will match their relative speed and perform the necessary mining with unmanned robots. That is a simple explanation of ‘his’ plan.”

Some feared it was unrealistic, but she had of course expected that.

“This is entirely possible using ion engines that can provide weaker propulsion for longer periods of time and using the strategic weapons all of you have in excess. More importantly, this is not just a plan to delay the inevitable. ‘He’ said that making use of the asteroids and reusing the proper resources will provide a realistic solution to the problem of manned mining of Mars.”

The distressed tension filling the room gradually ebbed. A realistic wall had been tormenting these people and they no longer had any way to think on their own, so they just wanted someone – anyone – to give them the answer.

But it was true that one of them was none too pleased with this answer.

A certain country had imprisoned ‘him’ and was using ‘him’ for itself. Not that they would have ever officially admitted it.

That was why Kotemitsu Madoka said what she did next.

“As I said, this is all what ‘he’ has said.”

Part 36 (3rd person — Day ??/?? ??:?? - ??:??)

The extreme east of Siberia in Russia was a white hell entirely covered in blizzards. A certain research facility was located at the center of a military facility that would never be found on any map.

Those involved called it the Robot Factory.

“He”, Jinnai Shinobu, had long been imprisoned there.

Despite being a research institution for unmanned robots, it was almost entirely filled with a high power supercomputer. The collection of parallel processing devices was large enough to fill a soccer field and that was where his theories took form. Afterwards, they would actually be built in a different workplace located somewhere with an eight hour time difference.

During the past ten years, his days as a boy had ended.

He wore a lab coat over a cheap suit as well as thin glasses. His hair was still dyed blond, making it about the only thing unchanged, but it had gradually diverged from his overall atmosphere as he had aged.

The supercomputer cost as much as five or six large amusement parks, but he rudely rested his feet on the console while sipping bitter coffee from a mug. Suddenly, he looked up toward the ceiling.

He was creepily monitored twenty-four hours a day, but that eerie gaze had just vanished.

The reason was obvious.

The thick door was supposedly locked several times over, but some great strength knocked it inwards. Next came a few bloody soldiers. Lastly, a woman with a glamorous body stepped inside.

“Hishigami Mai, hm? You haven’t changed,” he said. “I mean it. Why haven’t you aged?”

“My body allows for replacements.”

“And why are you wearing a tank top and hot pants in arctic Siberia?”

“I was wearing a coat with the perfect insulation of a thermos, but I threw it away partway in because it was soaked with blood.”

Despite this meeting with an old acquaintance, his expression remained unchanged.

All he did was lower his gaze from the ceiling to the mug.

“Why are you here?”

“Did you really think we wouldn’t notice what you’re trying to do?”

“Then I see no reason for you to stop me.”

“It’s too soon to start moving. The Japanese people were scattered around the world on that day, but a lot of them have grown accustomed to their new lives as they wait. Your actions could easily rob that of them.”

“I see.” Jinnai Shinobu took a sip from the mug. “Then will you kill *me*?”

“That too would be a problem. It would change things too much. After all, all space development now comes from you. Or more accurately, you and Kotemitsu Madoka set it up that way. Sometimes you even buy out a rival research institute or hack in to alter their research data.”

“Then what will you do?”

“How about I put you to sleep for a few years? Not letting you live but not letting you die would be best. …To be honest, getting it just right is tricky. That’s why I was chosen instead Mr. Illness Magic.”

“I see.”

He did not even turn toward her as he spoke.

“But you are not enough to defeat me.”

With a sudden explosive sound, a nearby wall was destroyed by a tremendous force and an eight-legged crab-like weapon rushed in. The silver monster acted as a shield for Jinnai Shinobu.

Hishigami Mai whistled.

“Using space development tech for military purposes? You’re like a villain from an American comic book.”

“I was never interested in space. I needed the technology to efficiently decontaminate that country and the military might to push back any other countries that try to interfere. It just so happened that robots were the answer I arrived at.”

“But a piece of junk like that can’t kill me.”

“Then how about I give it a power up?”

As soon as he spoke, a gust of wind surrounded him like a small tornado. Once the wind settled down, a woman leaned on his back with her slender arms embracing his neck. She was not human. She had horns on her head, wings on her back, and a tail on her hips.

Mai gave a ferocious smile.

“The Succubus, hm?”

“Yes, yes. Hello, everyone. The Japanese-made Youkai may not have been able to leave, but demons like me cover the entire world. My master has been quite loving to me☆”

“I see, I see. Hah hah!! So this is why Kotemitsu Madoka has been taking such obvious action over the past ten years. You’ve been using that demon’s power to cheat, haven’t you!?”

“It isn’t just her. I dealt with Kotemitsu Madoka directly, which doubled as a test, but the illusion of making love can be transmitted over the internet as well. It is most effective against any woman without your level of resistance. I’m sure you would be shocked if you knew the number I had ‘won over’ to achieve my goal.”

“Hm. So did you seal the Succubus’s power in that piece of junk to create an unmanned weapon that uses supernatural and paranormal powers?”

Mai casually clapped twice.

“If so, that had the opposite effect. I specialize in that sort of thing, so I’m oh-so-thankful you felt the need to bring this into my territory. Now, it’s about time I finished with you.”

“She isn’t what it uses. The Succubus is only the primer.”

“?”

“Do you remember the Australian witch that showed up that one time? And do you remember how she was defeated using the Succubus’s name and a certain postcard?”

“You don’t mean…”

“The names of two different demons were used to trick that witch. One was the Succubus’s and the other belonged to a much more powerful demon that almost ranks in as one of the Seven Deadly Sins.”

“You don’t mean…!!”

“Tselika Wien Alpha Chelydia Lumidrier, empress of the empty throne not part of the seven seats. Reveal your majesty in accordance with your master’s will.”

The world was compressed.

The mere manifestation was all it took to break one of the main parts of Hishigami Mai’s utterly modified body.

A sound more disturbing than the breaking of every bone in her body rang out again and again with more regularity than the ticking of a clock. New life now resided in the silver crab-like weapon.

“Now, then.”

Finally, Jinnai Shinobu removed his feet from the console and stood from his chair.

But he did not bother looking at what remained of Hishigami Mai.

With the Succubus clinging to his back and the unmanned weapon containing one of the strongest demons to his side, he gently shook his mug and spoke.

“I suppose it’s about time to head out into the world once more.”

Part 37 (3rd person — Day ??/?? ??:?? - ??:??)

When word secretly reached them, some of the standing member nation representatives trembled.

Kotemitsu Madoka ignored them as she continued speaking.

“If everything has gone as planned, ‘he’ will already be free and travelling through the world as ‘he’ pleases.”

She spoke slowly and skillfully.

“To put it another way, any nation could now become the leader in space development. Which nation will accept ‘him’? This could influence your entire history for the next century.”

Every one of them obviously wanted this.

Instead of going through the proper process and waging war over it, they were about ready to begin a scuffle in the meeting room right here.

“There is but one price,” said Madoka. “Permission to decontaminate that country that we lost and the authority to directly manage the reclaimed land. That is all. If you support us on this, you will become the victor of this era.”

Some nations did not want that.

Others still wanted that island nation for themselves.

But anyone who opposed this plan would become the loser of the next era. They would be thrown from the space development race and they would wither away as they tried to rely on this planet as its resources dried up.

They had only one option.

They could only hold each other in check while they grinned and supported that nation’s revival.

“Then I will leave it at that.”

Kotemitsu Madoka answered their silence.

As she slowly began to leave, someone asked a question that strayed from the main point.

That plan would cost a massive amount of money and she was funding it with the massive amount of assets she had gathered from around the world. So someone asked why she was willing to go this far.

She slowly looked back and soft words flowed from her mouth.

Part 38 (3rd person — Day ??/?? ??:?? - ??:??)

And after making use of everything and making an enemy of everything, “he” returned to that place.

He saw that nostalgic rural scenery and he saw the kind of thatch-roof Japanese house one would see on an old postcard. With his entire body contained within a spacesuit, he could not breathe in the air or feel the ground beneath his feet, but he had returned all the same.

The fields and paddies were less disturbed than he had expected and the houses had also survived. The Youkai living there had likely continued to maintain them even after all of the humans had evacuated.

“Hi.”

His muffled voice spoke.

A Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata sat on the porch like always.

She had likely been waiting there every single day for the last ten years. As she fanned herself with a Japanese-style fan, she looked up and smiled ever so thinly.

“Oh? I see you’re the type to dutifully keep your promises.”

“It’s still going to take some time, but I’ve shortened it by quite a lot. The original environment should be back in about another ten years.”

“I see. I had never thought you were stupid, but still…”

“This technology is technically meant to allow humans to live on the moon or Mars… or that’s how I camouflaged it, at least. Well, this is still a lot closer to home than outer space.”

“But it looks like you managed to spin the dial all the way around back to idiot. You didn’t have to go this far to stick with us Youkai.”

Still wearing the spacesuit, he sat next to her.

“Once it’s all over, let’s begin it all anew…Yukari.”

He spoke a single name.

Instead of calling her an Indoor Youkai or a Good-for-Nothing Youkai, he used her name.

He was not just taking back the lost time; he was already thinking about what came after.

“Yes,” whispered the Zashiki Warashi as she slowly waved her fan. “If it led to this, then maybe that ending wasn’t so bad after all.”

Notice//

Administrator,

Manual command for the current Package detected. Outputting progress report.

Please review the details.

The virtual plans have been successfully constructed using Jinnai Shinobu and Singer Song Liar, the digital song composition and side story self-creation software. The overwriting of reality will begin at 2030 hours. From there, freedom of choice will be erased from the world. Like the neck of an hourglass, all possible human choices are sure to arrive at the end point of the “Sale of Japan” scenario. At that point, the possibilities will expand once more.

The scenario’s end point was confirmed upon the completion of Plan 1 “Personal_apocalypse”, but the nature of the Package allows for unpredictable fluctuations on the way to that point. Please pay careful attention so that the fluctuations do not produce any losses and please begin Plan 2 “Rail_song_jail”.

Welcome to the changing world, Administrator.

Jinnai Shinobu's Apocalypse — Side B — OP_code"Rail_song_jail".

Part ? (3rd person — Day ??/?? ??:?? - ??:??)

“Lost baggage? …What? You mean, um, wait. So it was lost!? But that ‘item’ was top secret!!”

“It’s already gone, so there’s no use complaining about it. Or do you think that’s going to magically make it appear?”

“If it was that important, why didn’t you keep it with your carry-on baggage? I’m going to officially report this!!”

“I didn’t want something that dangerous on me! I know plenty of people who assumed a domestic flight was safe and came to regret it!!”

“Okay, understood. Everyone, we need to calm down. The carrier decided to transport the ‘item’ by hiding it in a civilian travel bag, but that travel bag has gone missing as lost baggage. Is that clear?”

“Can’t we track the bag?”

“If we’d attached a transmitter, the signal would have been intercepted. It would be like telling the entire world to come take it from us.”

“You mean…”

“No one knows what airport it ended up at.”

“The airline isn’t stupid. They’ll find it before long and contact the civilian student. There’s nothing we can do until that student picks up his travel bag.”

“Could someone fake their identity so we can collect the bag ourselves?”

“Do you *want* to stand out? That would increase the risk of revealing the ‘item’s’ existence, you know?”

“…Dammit.”

“Now you’re catching on. Unfortunately, all we can do now is pray.”

Part 2 (Jinnai Shinobu — Day 10/03 20:30 - 20:40)

“……What the…hell is this?” I muttered while staring at my cellphone’s small screen.

What I had read was so insane that I may have briefly passed out at points.

It had all started as I tried to kill some time waiting in the lobby of the island’s floating airport in the hopes of my lost baggage showing up.

I had used Singer Song Liar.

It was one of the many free net services flooding the market and it was best described as “strange songwriting software”.

If you entered lyrics and music, it would automatically create a story to go along with it. It had an easy mode that allowed you to paste in countless pre-recorded samples and gave you help with what to write next using something similar to a predictive search. That allowed users to casually create a song in as little as ten minutes. (Of course, I’d heard all the songs made with easy mode sounded a lot alike.)

I didn’t know exactly how the story creation worked, but it apparently took the genre (classic, jazz, techno, rock, etc.), the type of melody (ballad, blues, pop, etc.), commonly-used phrases, the rhythm, and the terms and names used in the lyrics to arrange hundreds of thousands of phrases to form the best story. Or something like that.

It had gotten famous when the big message boards started asking why they would let people use such a convenient and high-level service for free and then I had heard it got pretty overloaded during the weekends and late night.

Since I was bored, I had spent about twenty minutes making a song just to try it out, but…

“Wait, wait, wait. That is a lot of text.”

According to the message boards, the shorter ones were only a few pages long and the longer ones were a full thirty-page short story, but it looked like I had a full novel.

And then there was the content.

“Wow.”

This says the Japanese archipelago was entirely sealed off, I became a world-famous robot scientist to take Japan back, I made a contract with the Succubus and made full use of her, I made a contract with a Seven Deadly Sins class demon to power up an unmanned robot – oh, wow – I one-shotted Hishigami Mai, I was some sexy mad scientist, I fulfilled my promise with the Zashiki Warashi a decade later while wearing a spacesuit, “Once it’s all over, let’s begin it all anew…Yukari. (Trying to sound classy)” Oh, wow. Using her name? What!? Was she my wife or something? Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!

“Why do I feel like I was just presented with some embarrassing old notebook I don’t remember writing!? I didn’t do anything, so why am I stuck here writhing in embarrassment!? Besides, my name was the only one in the lyrics, so where did all the rest of this come from? It’s strange but really embarrassing!! I’m curious, but I want nothing to do with this!!”

N-not to mention that it said I took on a legit con artist in a casino, that I survived a direct hit from a car bomb, that we tried to rescue the kidnapped Zashiki Warashi on our own, and that we dragged twenty-four corpses into one spot! That should have been enough to think this was unrealistic! I never knew how scary it was that machines have no sense of shame! I’m not my uncle, the living police drama who dreamed of being a police officer and actually got into Investigation Department 1, and I’m not Hishigami Mai, who can singlehandedly fight a war and head home with

a smile! What is this? If the song I made without really thinking produced this, then is my mind still filled with embarrassing teenage delusions!? That's depressing! And why the hell would you omit the part where I misused the Succubus's power to make out with Madoka!? That's the most important part! I can't believe this! This damn digital program doesn't get it at all! You stupid, stupid, stupid thing!!!!!

"…I want to die."

It made sense that my mind had gone blank and that I had lost track of time. It was only once I muttered those four words that I noticed a soft sensation leaning against my upper arm.

My right temple itched. It was true I had been holding the Zashiki Warashi in my arms in Singer Song Liar, so I looked over.

It was Hafuri.

The young leader of the brutal and villainous organization named Hyakki Yakou was sleeping there in a kimono.

“H-…”

My throat immediately went dry and I screamed before my brain could catch up.

“Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!???”

I impulsively tried to escape, but this time I felt something heavy resting on my opposite shoulder.

What is it now? A Konaki-Jijii? I thought as I looked over.

“Y-you’re kidding.”

It was Hishigami Mai.

The assassin in a tank top and hot pants was sleeping with her head on my shoulder.

No, a closer look showed her eyes were ever-so-slightly opened like thin blades.

“What’s wrong with you? Don’t wake the young lady when she’s so sleeping so comfortably.”

She’s awake!?

Does that mean I can’t sneak away!?

Being with my parents is a negative, but I still hoped to meet a bunch of girls on this casino island and make some wonderful memories. But does this that dream has been destroyed before I even leave the airport!?

A small canine Youkai was rubbing his head against Hishigami Mai’s boots. I remembered it was a Sunekosuri.

“I can understand reacting that way to Mai-san, but isn’t it rude to include kind Hafuri-sama in that?”

“It’s not her I’m afraid of. It’s all the people around her!!”

She must have been a little tired from the trip because the girl with a bob cut showed no sign of waking despite all my shouting.

“A-anyway, I’m waiting for my lost suitcase. The Zashiki Warashi was with me, so do you know where she got off to?”

“As soon as she caught sight of Hafuri-sama and Mai-san, she left as quickly as she could.”

“…”

Of course she did.

My right temple itched. In Singer Song Liar, she had shielded me from bombs and bullets and gone on a rampage like a murder machine, but reality was a different story.

“Why are you all here?”

“Wait until the young lady has gotten some rest.”

“To be honest, I have to pee so bad I’m about to wet myself! If you make me wait here any longer, it’s going to end badly for everyone involved!!”

“We’re here for you.” Hishigami Mai rubbed her own face. “A special Package using an Amanojaku has been constructed on Goldmine Island. People like us normally don’t head out to deal with some criminals trying to make a little money, but this Amanojaku Package is pretty bad. They want it dealt with quickly even if they have to pay a steeeeeep price for it.”

“An Amanojaku?”

“Right. We don’t know the details of the Package, but we can see its effects popping up here and there. How should I explain it? People’s actions are supposed to be based on ideas inside them, but we’ve noticed *a lot of people* such as corporate bigshots and national bureaucrats doing weird things that completely ignore those ideas. It’s like they’re being pulled by a magnet and the higher ups of our world don’t like the looks of it. They want someone – anyone – to take care of it and fast.”

I remembered that the Amanojaku was said to be a mischievous Youkai or one that answers any question with the opposite answer. There were apparently a number of theories saying it was originally an oni or a god. If you checked through the stories, it would sometimes capture people, eat them, skin them, wear the skin, and pretend to be them. That put it squarely in the “deadly” category.

“Um, I’m not going to be seen as an accomplice because you told me that, am I?”

“Either way, this is never going to be public knowledge.”

“That just scares me more!!”

I turned to the Sunekosuri, hoping for help, but the canine Youkai was focused on rubbing up against the woman’s boots.

You stupid perverted dog! You’re completely useless!!

“Wait, so what does that have to do with me!? If you underworld people are going to fight to the death, do it somewhere away from me!!”

“*We need to know what you created.*”

Uh, oh!!!

“I-I-I-I-I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You can’t fool me. I know you’re hooked on Singer Song Liar. Didn’t you know it’s made to steal your personal information?”

C’mooooooooooooooooooooonnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn!! You mean I can’t ignore this? And how did that thing turn into all this!?

“We still haven’t located the core of the Package, but we can guess it brings a manmade world into reality. They probably polished up the ‘answering with a lie’ trait and remade it into ‘turning a lie into the answer’.”

“……”

No, no.

Wait. No, no, no, no!?

Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! What would that mean? Will that embarrassingly delusional automatically-created story actually happen!? The poker game against a con artist, the car bombing, the kidnapping, the slaughter of the villains, the Zashiki Warashi’s rampage, the theft of the country, and the elimination of Japan will all come true!? No, wait! Just remembering it is making my temple itch like hell!!!!!

“Why? Why was I of all people dragged into this Amanojaku Package!?”

“Who knows. I said we haven’t located the core, remember? More importantly, let me see that phone you’ve been so focused on. What it says will let us know how to deal with what’s coming.”

“……Do I have to tell you?”

“What? Is it some adolescent wet dream?”

I covered my face in a hand and confessed.

“In a way, it’s worse.”

Part 3 (Uchimaku Hayabusa — Day 10/03 20:30 - 20:43)

I descended the stairs that rolled up to the airplane and set foot on the national airport’s runway. A detective usually wore a cheap suit year-round, but it was feeling a little too hot for that now. It made me wonder if it really was October.

“Ahh. So we’re finally at the casino island!! Was it called Goldmine Island? I’m glad to see you’re so excited.”

My general grumpiness was contrasted by the grinning National Police Agency VIP next to me.

He was Chief Superintendent Mishima.

If you wanted to know just how much of a VIP he was, there were only two or three more ranks above him. No matter how perfectly you went about getting promotions, that wasn’t a position someone in their late thirties should have.

“Why am I on a Kyushu resort island?” I asked without thinking.

Chief Superintendent Mishima must not have had anything to do because he actually answered me.

“For some observation and a study meeting. With thirty million people crammed in together, Tokyo keeps ending up in the red with its social security and infrastructure maintenance, so they’re looking for a new source of income. They’ve been talking about building a casino in the city for a while now. It would be centered on the Izu Islands and far away from the city center.”

“Yes, I’d heard all that, but still.”

“As the police, we’d like to know the positive and negative sides of a casino before laying the groundwork for a new system. We especially need to know how it affects the criminal map. As you can see, there’s nothing strange about Tokyo’s Metropolitan Police Department taking a trip to Kyushu’s Goldmine Island. Even if the trip is paid by the city residents’ tax money.”

Incidentally, I belonged to the Metropolitan Police Department which guarded the peace of Tokyo while Mishima belonged to the National Police Agency which supervised all of Japan’s police. That made everything from Hokkaido on down to Okinawa his territory. It didn’t matter to him how fiercely the ombudsmen or civil groups complained about how we used the taxes.

“You’ve heard about Kobe’s failure, right? It got so surrounded by famous hotels, casinos, shopping malls, and leisure facilities that the sightseers never set foot outside those places and nothing went back to the locals. There are even groups online demanding they drive out the ‘shut-in resorts’. We want to avoid that kind of trouble when we’re making plans for the city, so this is an important job.”

“But isn’t this a job for the uniformed officers way, way, wayyyy higher up than me!?”

“Yes? Why do you think I’m here?”

Chief Superintendent Mishima glanced around the runway as he spoke.

There were quite a few people in the area who seemed out of place. Beyond the normal workers running around refueling planes or guiding flights in, I noticed some people guarding our surroundings. And they were all dressed in the gaudy miniskirts of the female police officers you would see on the cover of an American pin-up magazine.

Needless to say, no Japanese police organization used that kind of uniform.

Chief Superintendent Mishima (appeared to) casually observe them while speaking.

“We don’t want an influx of armed guards into Tokyo. Did you know these guards actually get pharmacist licenses so they can carry around a compressed-gas tranquilizer gun? I wonder who would win if one of them got in a fight with one of our officers.”

The thick belts around their waists contained several leather cases and I could see a gun-like silhouette along with the baton and handcuffs.

“I hear they’ve formed a high-level and large-scale organization here. I just hope they don’t start taking bribes and turn into a new gang.”

“That isn’t what I meant. Why did you have to drag someone with a dead-end police sergeant job out here!?”

“You can never get the whole picture just by looking down on things from above, so I want to know how things look to someone who investigates crimes on the ground. And when I told your department chief, he immediately suggested you.”

Damn him!! Is he shoving all the pain-in-the-ass work onto me!?

I turned around just as several people from the police rushed noisily down from the plane. There were a lot from both the Metropolitan Police Department and the National Police Agency. While they were uniformed police officers, these were not the people out on the streets. They were all distinguished enough it wouldn’t have surprised me to see medals on their chests.

Overall, this didn’t feel at all like a fun trip to a tropical island, so I wished they could feel even a fraction of the pressure weighing down on my stomach.

I felt like I was only receiving half the oxygen I breathed in as we rode the shuttle bus to the airport terminal. Lately, security had gotten stricter even for domestic flights, but all of them were let right through the gate. Not only did security not X-ray their suitcases, but security didn’t even check what they were carrying with them. Of course, none of them seemed to have any intention of carrying their own bags.

And if the higher ups had it easy, those at the bottom had it tough.

I dragged Chief Superintendent Mishima’s suitcase around as I exited the airport building with all those important people.

They immediately began boarding black luxury cars that were clearly not normal taxis. There were five or six of them in a row with police cars in between and two police motorcycles at the very center. The National Police Agency probably saw this as being self-sufficient, but normal society would want to ask if they thought they were royalty.

After I shoved someone’s suitcase in the unlocked trunk, the smoked window lowered and the career policeman addressed me.

“Okay, Uchimaku-kun, just follow the time schedule from here on. We’ll be having a secret strategy meeting on a luxury cruise ship, but be honest. You don’t want to join us, do you?”

This was obviously an order, so I had no choice but to answer with a huge smile.

“Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooot at all.”

“To be honest, I don’t either. I don’t want to meet with people so old they can’t taste the drinks and only focus on the price tag. …Do you think there’s a good Chinese dumpling place around here? I feel like showing up with terrible garlic breath just to mess with them. See you later.”

He waved his hand and the parade left the roundabout. Only the others as young as me were left behind. As soon as the cars vanished, we all let out heavy sighs but immediately exchanged a glance and cleared our throats. We couldn’t have anyone informing the higher ups of that. There was no chance of us getting along, so we all walked off in different directions.

“Now, then. What to do?”

My official duties were clear. My immediate objective was to find some dinner, but I grimaced as soon as I saw a vending machine. The drinks were all over a thousand yen each, so the casino city would be hopeless. I would be better off spending the night holding my stomach. So what else was there to do? A police officer in a suit couldn't exactly go gambling on his own. Besides, my repeated pay cuts had left me with nothing to gamble with. However, I didn't want to head straight to the inn and go to sleep either. I just knew I would wake up at some weird time like three or four in the morning.

I had nothing to do.

I was on a resort island, and yet I was about ready to lean in over my cellphone and download a mystery-solving app or something.

But then a familiar voice reached me from the side.

"Detective☆"

……
…..Hishi…gami…Enbi.

Well, to be honest, something had smelled fishy from the moment I was asked to go on this irregular trip. You know what I mean? It felt just like one of those moments you invariably run across if you live long enough. Like when a landslide blocks the road and you go to a creepy mansion to get out of the rain, when you board a sleeper train after waiting for someone to cancel and run into a man in a mask, or when you win a ticket in a shopping center lottery and it turns out to be for the detached room at an inn where people kept suspiciously killing themselves ten years ago. It felt just like that!! Like when there's some ancient bloody ritual or a gloomy counting song that ends with not just the secret basement but the entire inn making a complete 180!! Just like that!! So I had expected this much! I wasn't crying yet!!!!!

It was Hishigami Enbi.

That mystery freak had a way of popping up at the scenes of disturbing murders. It was to the point that I wondered if that indiscrete twintailed middle school girl had the Grim Reaper walking around with her.

However, my shock this time wasn't over her showing up without warning on Goldmine Island.

It was over how she was dressed.

Simply put…

"What in the world are you wearing?"

"You don't know what a bunny suit is? This is a casino city, so what else am I supposed to wear if I want to blend into the background without standing out?"

"You look like you're illegally working in the red-light district!! You're nothing but trouble to all the law-abiding businesses around you!!"

"Heh heh heh. There may not be much space, but I do have a lighter in my cleavage just like the real deal."

“Did you know that carrying flammable material around in public without any obvious purpose is against the law?”

When I sighed and confiscated the lighter, Bunny Enbi got mad.

“How can you stick your hand in there so casually!?”

“Because it’s part of my job.”

“Yeah, but you’re supposed to blush and fidget a bit first! You’re doing a terrible job!!”

I felt like the voices of the surrounding crowd were changing a bit.

Oh, this ain’t good. A grown adult in a suit with a middle school bunny girl is definitely going to give people the wrong idea!

The (female, of course) armed guards in miniskirts who looked like something from an American pin-up magazine were slowly approaching and I felt the hair all over my body stand on end.

It was true a legit police officer wasn’t about to lose an argument with a civilian guard, but there was no way I was going to use my full intellect to argue about something like this at my age!

“Why are you here!? Why in the world are you here to ruin my social standing!?”

“Huh? You mean you aren’t here because you’re pursuing that incident?”

…

I want nothing to do with this, I thought while covering my face and curling up, but that wasn’t enough to stop the Mystery Bunny.

“Y’know, the one with all the rumors online.”

“You mean the Samejima Incident?”

“It’s a little more credible than that online urban legend.”

I could clearly picture the grin on her lips as she continued.

“You mean you haven’t heard of the Urashima Incident?”

Part 4 (Hishigami Mai — Day 10/03 20:45 - 20:55)

“Dwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

I had Jinnai Shinobu tell me the Singer Song Liar story at the center of the Amanojaku incident, but…

I-I can’t… I can’t stop laughing! Hee!!

“W-well, I’m sure whoever it was chose a song that fit their goals, but still. Japan was sold off? What a ridiculous story. Ah ha ha ha!!”

“Stop! Just stop!!”

Unsurprisingly, the blond high school boy blushed red and sobbed.

“Besides, a Singer Song Liar story is normally only two or three pages and twenty to thirty at the most. Hm, so did someone set this up? Or was Producer Jinnai’s wonderful song just that exceptional!?”

“How many times do I have to tell you to stop rubbing salt in my wounded heart!?”

Drawn by my uproarious laughter, the young lady of Hyakki Yakou finally woke.

“Mumble… What is going on? Oh, is Target A up?”

“Now I can’t escape!!”

Jinnai Shinobu shouted as he was held from both sides.

C’mon, you’re sandwiched between an innocent little girl and a glamorous young woman, so why not look a little happier with your life?

Meanwhile, the young lady rubbed her eyes.

“How is Target A progressing? Have you figured out anything about the symbol of the lie? In the story of the Amanojaku skinning the princess and wearing her skin, it began attacking the humans once its identity was revealed. Similarly, revealing the great lie should be the best way to damage the enemy in this case.”

“Let’s see. (Grin, grin) What should I do here? (Hee hee) Should I tear open his wounded heart any further? (Heh heh heh)”

“I’ll give you up to three thousand yen!! Either don’t say anything or do it where I can’t see you!!”

The boy was truly in tears, but I ignored him and shared the necessary information with the young lady.

It looked like his temperature rose by another half a degree.

The ten year old with a bob cut brought a hand to her mouth.

“The national suicide Package using an Usuhiki Warashi, a subspecies of the Zashiki Warashi? Yes, it looks like the Amanojaku system is strongly affecting Jinnai Shinobu’s words and actions. Otherwise, a mere high school boy could never arrive at something hidden so deep inside Japan.”

“It’s real? Are you saying that national suicide thing is for real!? That isn’t some embarrassing story a computer made up on its own!? What is wrong with Japan!?”

“But I’m surprised to see that old abandoned thing showing up again. How did the information get out?”

“The casino city has to have a bunch of ridiculously huge financial servers to deal with the black cards, so it wouldn’t be too difficult to access the ‘core’ of that old thing remotely. Maybe this island has something like a backdoor terminal.”

“I’m curious about the gray-haired man that appeared at the end of the Goldmine Island part. He was an elderly white man with an Ikiryou assassination Package that used a Kechibi and he also had the superhuman Obou-Jikara gained through the trial of an Ubume’s baby. And his goal was to buy Japan.”

“It was probably Sid Clouds. He’s an occult expert who specializes in weaponizing the local oddities of wherever he’s infiltrating. Plus, a thorough shift toward offense is totally his style and I could definitely see him showing up at the very end to take all the credit.”

“Isn’t he with the CIA?”

“The top secret national suicide system was leaked, so wouldn’t the possibility of someone here letting it slip be more likely than an external cyberattack? And using some random criminals for the dirty work and letting the official agents stay hidden is their specialty.”

“If you’re right about it being Sid Clouds that means America is behind this.”

“What proof do we have that America is always going to be an ally? With their domestic economic issues coinciding with the commotion of withdrawing from their foreign military bases, the influence of the ‘world police’ is being shaken from the inside and the outside. It doesn’t seem that odd for them to consider taking control of this country’s financial foundation before their sources of money dry up. And I bet those macho-men in tights think they’re wisely protecting their ally from its incompetent administration, so they don’t even realize they’re making an invasion.”

“Either way, we need to put an end to the sale of Japan while also dealing with the Amanojaku that is making that false information a reality. I do think it’s too soon to decide Sid Clouds really is behind this, though.”

“Fine, fine. I have two or three things to get back at him for, so I have reason enough to kill him even if he’s completely innocent on this one. So look at it this way: I’ll ask him about this while I kill him. So can I get going?”

“Hyakki Yakou does not condone revenge.”

“That’s why a freelance agent like me does the dirty work. Do you get what our different roles are now?”

“I…”

“You will not be going with me. If someone in as important a position as you walked the back alleys on your own, it would throw everything out of balance. I’ll leave your protection to those official members sending all sorts of murderous stares our way from behind the pillars, okay?”

The Sunekosuri must have sensed something dangerous because he tried to sneak away, but I snatched him up and stood from the bench.

“Well, I’ll be doing what I can while assuming what Jinnai Shinobu said is correct.”

She must not have fully woken yet because the young lady was still leaning against Jinnai Shinobu.

“Do you know where Sid Clouds is?” she asked.

“One of the moored cruise ships.”

“Based on what?”

“Mostly based on my knowledge of his taste and methods, but fine. To explain it logically, he can’t sleep without a bed, can’t use chopsticks, won’t eat raw fish, doesn’t call something a meal unless it has more than 250g of red meat, and doesn’t like sharing open air baths with others. That means there’s no way he would be using one of Goldmine Island’s Japanese-style inns.”

“Do you have any more tactical reasons?”

“The cruise ship has a heliport he can use. He can bring all sorts of tools to the island while ignoring harbor and airport security, so it’s convenient for building multiple Packages like the Kechibi and Ubume ones.”

That meant I had to sneak onto that cruise ship.

Now, what method should I use?

Part 5 (Uchimaku Hayabusa — Day 10/03 20:45 - 21:05)

Cosplay is my hobby, so don’t worry☆

“Hey, detectiiive, why do I have to walk around with this sign?”

“Because you’re scaring all the businesses around you a lot more than you think. They’ve put in a lot of hard work, so don’t ruin it all for a joke!!”

“Okay, I get it. If it’s that big a deal, I’ll take it off right here.”

“Try that and I really will handcuff you.”

A drink can cost more than a thousand yen on this crazy casino island, but there were apparently areas with cheaper prices if you looked.

We arrived at one such area while walking around looking at the red or yellow maple and gingko trees mixed in with the pineapple-like tropical trees lining the roads.

“It’s called Harbor Alley,” simply explained Bunny Enbi.

Instead of restaurants on a normal street, each small shop was located on cruisers or boats packing the harbor. They felt something like food carts with a roof and walls.

“The casino city is generally made so only the winners can enjoy it, but it would be a problem if the losers went on a rampage. That’s why they intentionally added in these areas for them to let off some steam. The service here prevents incidents before they happen, so it’s a way of protecting the peace that the police can’t do.”

“The best option is an inn using the ultra-high quality brands of an Intellectual Village, the second best option is a luxury cruise ship, but the worst option is life on a cruiser? Honestly, this island really is crazy.”

I was clearly fed up with it all.

“Ohh? Detective, are you nervous?”

“I just don’t want any more unnecessary work.”

The boats didn’t seem to be made of metal. They were more like plastic or an extremely hard polyurethane. Basically, it was something like a life preserver, but harder and cheaper.

Making the boat entirely out of plastic probably gave them a lot more freedom than pressing metal, cutting it apart, and assembling the pieces.

We eventually chose a random cruiser restaurant from among those plastic boats. Only after sitting at the table in the cabin did I realize it was a Chinese restaurant.

“Why doesn’t this Chinese restaurant have normal ramen?”

“Detective, you’ve never travelled overseas, have you? Most of what the Japanese think of as ‘Chinese food’ has been customized for us. There is no miso ramen in China. Got it?”

I ordered the salmon and cabbage fried rice (half size) because it was cheapest and Enbi started with the appetizers by ordering the century egg, bird’s nest soup, shark fin soup, abalone in cream, seafood ankake okoge…and at that point I confiscated her menu.

“Are you trying to eat yourself to death?”

“I’ll only eat a bite of each and give the rest to you. I have a guy with me, so I have to enjoy myself! And what better way than with a bunch of indirect kisses!!”

The Mystery Freak pouted her lips and complained, but I still opened the menu to the main dish page and held it out to her. Finally, she reluctantly chose just the dandan noodles.

There was no reason for us to wait for the food.

“So what all is going on here? What’s this Urashima Incident?”

“The horror stories about Goldmine Island are a pretty hot topic right now☆”

Enbi took a gulp of chilled water from her glass, set it on the table, and for some reason tried to swap it with my glass, so I slapped the back of her hand.

Undeterred, she continued speaking.

“It began with a single phone call between some stupid rich couple. The girlfriend had a new cruiser she wanted to show off, but the boyfriend didn’t like being outdone. He secretly bought an even more luxurious boat to surprise the girlfriend. He asked the girlfriend where she was on her boat and planned to show up on his new boat to surprise her.”

“I see.”

“But when he went to where she said she was, neither of them could see the other’s boat. And that was even when they were speaking on the phone at the time. The boyfriend thought it was a bad joke at first, but it gradually started to creep him out.”

“Oh, the dandan noodles were hers. I had the fried rice. Yes, thank you.”

“In the end, they exchanged data between their phones’ GPSs and their navigation devices, so they knew neither of them was lying. Nevertheless, they couldn’t seem to find each other despite supposedly looking at the same area. Eventually, their phone batteries died and they never did find each other. …Now, was one of them simply lying in some clever way or is there some ‘demonic sea’ around Goldmine Island that briefly sent them into the past or future yet still let those lovers talk over the phone? It’s up to the beautiful middle school girl and the sexy detective to reveal the truth!! That’s what’s going on here. …Are you even listening, detective? Stop focusing so much on your fried rice!!”

Munch, munch, munch, munch, munch.

Damn, this is good! I shouldn’t have cheaped out with the half size. This cruiser restaurant needs to come to Tokyo Bay!!

“There are other similar stories here and there, too. Like a helicopter camera crew trying to get a shot of a yacht for a TV show, but never being able to find the yacht. Or a boat of people coming to cheer on a macho man trying for a long-distance swimming record, but they not finding the man despite his course being a straight line. Makes you wonder, doesn’t it?”

“What is all that? Did you find it on some message board? All of it? Are you sure some freelance writer didn’t make it all up for fun?”

“Let’s investigate it with that possibility in mind.”

“I thought you loved murder cases. It isn’t like you to get so excited about a trick or chasing down a criminal. And is this even a criminal incident? Are you sure those aren’t just accidents?”

“My Enbi-chan sensor is beeping like crazy.”

After trying to show off, she took a bite of her red dandan noodles. The middle school girl immediately turned her head to the side and choked quite spectacularly.

“And what part of those doubtful rumors does your sensor think is suspicious?”

“Cough, cough!! W-well, you see…”

She pulled a handkerchief from the slight cleavage of her bunny suit, covered her mouth, and replied with tears in her eyes.

“All three freelance writers who covered these rumors died suspicious deaths.”

There was no sound.

Rather than feeling the atmosphere freeze over, I felt like all of my senses vanished. All information was taken from me and the world became flat and flavorless.

But Enbi continued as if she were only getting started.

“Specifically, it was freelance writer Hashiba Tooru, occult site administrator Ishida Megumi, and infamous self-proclaimed screenwriter Mouri Yajiri. They all focused on gathering rumors from the internet to write their works or articles.”

“What were these suspicious deaths?”

“They’re probably registered separately in the police database. Hashiba took an eight-story dive from a parking deck after the auto-brake system of his new car malfunctioned, Ishida’s cellphone battery exploded when she had it up to her ear, and Mouri’s hot water heater broke, quickly transforming his bathroom into a gas chamber. In all three cases, *it was treated as an accident due to improper contact inside the electronics*.”

“They certainly do sound like they could have been unfortunate accidents.”

“But what if there was *a system that let someone intentionally cause electronic circuits and semiconductors to lose contact?*”

I placed my Chinese spoon on the edge of my plate.

At first glance, it looked like trivial rumors spread on the internet, but the people who had dug a little deeper kept ending up dead.

“Hm? What is it, detective?”

“…Nothing.”

She knew she fit those criteria since she was in the process of gathering information on it, didn’t she?

She blinked her perfectly proportioned eyes and continued.

“Also, the online stories themselves are strange. As far as I can tell, the story is just about the ‘demonic sea’ that prevents two people from meeting each other. That’s all.”

“And?”

“Of course it doesn’t end with that. What happens afterwards? This is a big casino island, remember? The people working here are going to seem sketchy no matter how seriously they take their work. Stories of people disappearing on trips worry people enough, so what if a lover disappeared on this island of money and desire? It would cause a commotion far greater than from female customers vanishing from boutique dressing rooms. When someone disappears at sea, you normally report it to the lifesavers or the fire department, right? But I can’t find any data on that kind of thing in the official records I can reach.”

“Could it all be nothing but rumors and nothing actually happened?”

I grabbed the Chinese spoon again and brought some fried rice to my mouth, but it tasted nothing like it had before. It felt like eating 3D polygons.

Enbi, on the other hand, recklessly attempted to eat the red dandan noodles again and started choking for her trouble.

“Ugh. It’s so spicy it’s stinging my nose. …Well, that would be the most boring ending, but I do think it’s possible. But what if the ‘demonic sea’ and the island at its center had a system to suppress any complaints or objections? That would require the same kind of infrastructure needed to make female customers vanish from boutique dressing rooms without word getting out. And just as you would expect, several people investigating the truth of the rumors have ended up dead. …With all this lined up, wouldn’t it be weird *not* to find this topic interesting?”

There’s no hope for her when this actually makes her grin.

I thought while soaking the rice-covered Chinese spoon in the (small) chicken soup that had come with my fried rice.

“Some of that does bother me, but my policy hasn’t changed. I work for the Tokyo Municipal Police Department, so there’s nothing I can do on a small Kyushu island.”

“Oh? While the rumors happened here, the freelance writers who actually died were allll from Tokyo. And they died in Tokyo, too. Now, whose jurisdiction would that fall under?”

“Son of a bitch!!”

I swore without thinking, but there was no stopping Enbi once she was grinning like this.

She repeatedly blew on the red noodles that she couldn’t seem to conquer.

“And after coming this far, you can’t exactly say it has nothing to do with you.”

“After coming this far? All I’ve done is hear the rumors.”

“No, no, no, no, no. A few of the cruisers and yachts that vanished in the ‘demonic sea’ left this very harbor. They were right here in Harbor Alley. That means you’ve already set foot in one of the related areas. Do you understand?”

The minor in need of protection seemed to be having trouble eating her dandan noodles, so I kindly helped by shoving them into her mouth.

Part 6 (Jinnai Shinobu — Day 10/03 20:55 - 21:04)

I took off running while Hishigami Mai and Hafuri were whispering to each other (but they probably let me escape).

I found the Zashiki Warashi elegantly enjoying some milk tea at an airport café, so I grabbed the back of her neck.

“You traitor! You filthy traitor!!”

“Stop it, Shinobu. If you keep doing these embarrassing things in public, people might think we know each other. That would be a huge loss for me.”

“You can run if you want, but at least clue me in!! Why would you escape on your own!? You left me all alone in the middle of Hyakki Yakou! That’s scarier than going to a hot spring and finding tattoos everywhere you look!! Do you have any idea the kind of fear I was feeling!?”

“You’re a human, so you’re fine. It’s the Youkai like me that have to worry about that organization.”

The Indoor Youkai turned her face to the side to show off a melancholic look in profile, but I asked about something that was bothering me.

“By the way, how were you planning to pay for this? Youkai can’t take part in economic activity and a single drink costs a thousand yen on this casino island.”

“Smartphones sure are convenient. You can hold one up the register to pay for things.”

“And whose smartphone did you use!?”

“Mine, registered under your name.”

……
Looks like I need to give her a serious talking to.

Ahem.

“Then I’ll be taking back what you ‘borrowed’ once we get home. Oh, but don’t bother saying you have no money. I can just take a few of the video games from your shelf and sell them. You’ll be fine as long as I leave just one FPS game, right? I’ll take care of the rest.”

“No! Even you know it takes a monster to mess with someone’s collection, don’t you!? I need them all! I can’t lose even one of them!! You can’t do thaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaatttttttttttttttttt!”

“Don’t cling to me with tears and snot all over your face!! Everyone’s watching and it’s embarrassing!!”

I used both hands to peel away the Zashiki Warashi who was clinging to me without worrying what it did the collar and hem of her kimono.

Of course, my lost baggage left me with almost nothing in my wallet, so I was forced to pay with the smartphone regardless.

“The milk tea is three thousand yen and the table charge brings it up to four thousand five hundred♪”

“I so want to throw this Good-for-Nothing Youkai in the kitchen to wash dishes…”

With an electronic jingle, I paid for the tea at a price that would normally buy an entire can of tea leaves and then left the café with the Zashiki Warashi.

“Shinobu, what did you do to bring Hyakki Yakou here?”

“I don’t really know either, but it seems I was caught in the middle of an Amanojaku Package.”

“I see Youkai love you as much as ever.”

“But it seems the contents of a delusional story I had a program automatically create are going to be real. It sounds like we need to stop it before that happens.”

The Zashiki Warashi immediately began covering her chest with her hands.

“What…are you doing?”

“Your delusions…will become real? I-I can see it now!! School uniforms will be school swimsuits with bunny ears and every girl as far as the eye can see will have been impregnated!!”

“It was made by a shameless machine! It’s not my fault!!”

My angry shouting caught the attention of airport security, so we meaninglessly fled. We decided to hold a quick strategy meeting on our way to the building’s exit.

“But Singer Song Liar? Can a story made by a machine really encroach on the outside world?”

“Hyakki Yakou is the leader in that kind of thing and they said so.”

“Personally, I’d rather think we can’t believe it *because* Hyakki Yakou said it.”

“Then let’s test it out.”

We left the airport and found the taxi roundabout in front of us.

My right temple throbbed.

I snapped my fingers.

“Let’s use the white limousine taxi closest to us.”

“What are you going to do?”

I approached the middle-aged driver leaning against the side of the vehicle and I whispered so only the Zashiki Warashi could hear.

“(The first thing he says will be, “Welcome to Japan’s Vegas! This is the special casino district of Goldmine Island!!”)

“?”

The Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata frowned.

“Welcome to Japan’s Vegas! This is the special casino district of Goldmine Island!!”

The Indoor Youkai then looked back and forth between the driver and me.

It felt like cold fingertips were running along my spine.

I would be lying if I said I wasn’t surprised too.

But I could say even more if Singer Song Liar’s story was true. I just had to follow the text automatically created by the songwriting software.

“The license plate is ‘NAGASAKI X0X IS 37-XX’, the first ride is eight hundred yen, it’s one hundred twenty yen per three hundred meters after that, the driver’s seat and the back seats can be separated by smoked glass so lovers can make out in privacy, there are fifteen seats inside, and there’s a mini-fridge. The mini-fridge wasn’t opened, so I don’t know what’s inside it, though.”

“What’s this, what’s this? Are you using me for a magic trick? You’re gonna have to pay a fee for my consent, dammit.”

The driver sounded confused, but the Zashiki Warashi ignored him to check on the license plate below the bumper and to peer inside the black window.

But I was already convinced.

“The temperature is twenty-eight degrees and there are two crows flying in the night sky.”

I looked up.

“Five fireworks will go off with three seconds in between: red, red, yellow, blue, green.”

The drum-like blasts reverberated in my gut.

“The newspaper headline reads ‘Value of Aquaculture Eels Finally Outperforms Natural Ones’.”

It was now clear I could accurately predict even the text on the scraps of paper blowing in the wind.

There was no freedom of choice. This was not an open world.

It was like a linear RPG.

I was painfully aware of being on some great rails.

If I took it easy without thinking about this, we would be carried to that conclusion I had already seen.

The sense of danger had finally been properly installed.

“Let’s get going, Zashiki Warashi.”

“Get going where?” asked the Indoor Youkai.

“In the Singer Song Liar story, I rode that limousine taxi to the inn and then walked back to the casino city.”

I had to be careful.

Each and every decision could influence this one shot at reality.

“So let’s try something different this time. At the very least, we can’t follow these rails to the end.”

Part 7 (Hishigami Mai — Day 10/03 21:10 - 21:20)

“That’s the luxury cruise liner Yakata-II, constructed by Nagasaki Sakimori Heavy Industries, owned by Seven Oceans Sightseeing Corporation, registered with Panama, holds 1700, maximum displacement of 80,000 tons, and powered by three diesel turbines and a towing kite.”

After parting ways with the young lady, the Sunekosuri and I observed the enemy.

Most likely to divide up their interests, the airport was in the casino city and the port was by the inns.

That made it easy to observe. Unlike the casino and all its bright lights, there was a lot of darkness here. There were also plenty of small hills or mountains that had not been fully developed, so it was perfect for the likes of me to lie on the ground with binoculars in hand.

I hid among the pineapple-like tropical trees and checked on the port through the gaps in the few remaining maple and gingko trees. It was probably meant as a way to expand the port, but the floating portions made it even easier to observe. Those flat areas were perfect for peering down on from above.

The Sunekosuri scratched his ears with his back leg.

“What is a towing kite?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. It’s a giant kite attached to the bow with a wire to pull the ship with the power of the wind. It’s only a secondary means of propulsion, but German tankers have already adopted it as a way of cutting down on carbon dioxide emissions.”

“B-but…”

I didn’t know how this dark night looked to Youkai eyes, but the canine Youkai was nervously glancing around.

“How are you going to sneak into somewhere so strictly guarded? You have to do that first if you want to reach…Sid Clouds, was it? But can you?”

“Wait, wait. …Okay, there we go,” I said while looking at a thin LCD panel.

There was no easy way to hack into the systems used by Sid and the CIA, but the cruise ship belonged to a civilian sightseeing company. There defenses were full of holes.

“Tonight, the Yakata-II is holding a dinner show with a female singer, a gathering of National Police Agency members and local politicians, and a seasonal stage musical. …None of them have been canceled due to unforeseen trouble, so the ship won’t be completely closed off. They’re even accepting guests from the island, so it looks like I won’t have to swim through the dark sea with an oxygen tank and suction cups.”

“Eh? Eh!? It’s that easy!?”

“All I need is a showy dress, a color copy of a fake ticket, and a bit of acting. Okay, let’s go.”

No one else was watching and I didn’t care if the Sunekosuri saw, so I pulled a dress from my bag, stripped naked in the darkness, and finished changing.

I walked down the hill holding the Sunekosuri and hailed a taxi. From there, it was a straight shot to the floating port connected to the island. The taxi was an unnecessary expense, but it would have stood out too much if I arrived at the luxury cruise ship on foot.

The giant ship was moored alongside the land and a young man was checking a list of names and people’s tickets at the bottom of the gangway for normal guests.

“(Th-they’re going to notice!! It may be dark, but they’re going to find something wrong with that quick color copy. Besides, your name isn’t on their list!)”

“(Don’t worry. The ticket is just for him to see, not to give to him.)”

“(?)”

I ended my conversation with the Sunekosuri and smiled toward the young worker.

“Excuse me, but I need to check your ticket before you board.”

“Yes, yes. Um, I believe it was this- ah!!”

I pulled the color copy from my cleavage and intentionally let go of it just before handing it to the young man. The wind carried the counterfeit ticket away and I gave an adorable scream.

“Ah…ah…aaaaahhhhhhhhh!!”

“N-no, that’s fine. I can check the computer, so we won’t turn you away. So please calm down.”

“Um, uh…”

I fidgeted.

“The reservation wasn’t made under my name, so I don’t think you’ll find it if you search my name.”

“Oh, um, and what name is it under?”

“(His.)”

I leaned in so my wonderful breasts were at the perfect point on the verge of touching him and I whispered to him from close enough that he could feel my breath on his ear.

Of course, I had never met the middle-aged man I pointed at. I could guess what kind of person he was based on his posture and gait, though.

“(He wanted to enjoy himself in the nicest bed he could during his business trip, so he called me out without telling his wife. If you turn me away here, he might just go on a rampage like a wild animal.)”

“Eek!? Y-you mean, um, well, you’re his mistre-…”

“(We would prefer it if you didn’t use that term.)”

I continued my whispered slander.

“(After all, he’s with the police. In fact, he’s with the National Police Agency at the top of all the police in Japan. Even if it isn’t illegal, it would be a professional ethics problem if it got out.)”

“Ah, ah, ah.”

“(So. It would be a lot of help if you let me through without bothering to search the list. Even if you haven’t done anything wrong, it probably wouldn’t be fun to live your life under the eye of the head of the police.)”

“G-go right on in! If you know the police, I’m sure you won’t cause any problems!”

The young man quickly moved out of my way.

Even if the CIA were using it as a mobile base and even if Sid Clouds was using it for his own purposes, the ship itself was innocent and the people working there had no ill will. That was exactly why it was good camouflage, but the security was still full of holes.

But…

“Um, then why are you carrying a Youkai? Even if it looks like a small dog.”

The Sunekosuri clearly gave a start in my arms, but it did not matter.

Once I had started with a bluff, seeing it through to the end was the only option.

“(Oh, are you curious about that man’s ‘proclivities’? I wonder what he would do if he thought you were trying to find material to stir up a scandal. Do people do that on the internet and SNSs these days? Well, everyone has a way of getting information out, so he can’t let his guard down even with an amateur.)”

“I-I didn’t ask anything!! Please just hurry past!!”

“(Make sure to keep this a secret.)”

I waved a hand, boldly walked up the gangway, and boarded the cruise ship.

The Sunekosuri yelled a challenge at me while being squeezed into my breasts.

“What do you mean ‘proclivities’!? Just how were you thinking of using me? That’s disgusting!!”

“Oh, you want to go through it, step by step? How about I demonstrate while we’re at it?”

A lot of idiots judged people by their family, appearance, aura, or brand, but I used their posture and gait. It was suspicious for a nurse to walk around with their sensitive medical equipment clattering around and, if a police officer pressed your door’s intercom while slouching and mumbling, you should check their ID before undoing the door’s chain lock.

Similarly, people with holes in the knees of their pants, leaves in their hair, or other slight issues with their clothing were often accepted without issue as long as the person inside acted naturally.

When infiltrating enemy territory, you had to act like the people there.

I had to fit in with the ladies and gentlemen with money, time, and libido to spare (although they would never admit it), so I focused on changing how I controlled the axis running through the center of my body. I accurately took the “actions” that would match the dress that showed off every line of my body and the obviously impractical stiletto heels. I moved like the 3D polygon dolls that performed graphic dances based on motion capture data.

“We’re only in the passageway and there’s already a mini-skirt maid, so what are things like inside? Are the police holding a Black Mass or something?”

“Is she like a waitress?” asked the Sunekosuri.

“They really need to stop making this kind of mistake!! A maid and a waitress are completely different things!! A maid is supposed to wear a long skirt and an apron dress! Don’t give them a corset and a skirt with suspenders that accentuates the breasts! That’s just indecent!! The point of a maid is to have beauty too great to be fully hidden by the plain and conservative outfit! Hmph!!”

“I have no idea what has you so mad.”

As I walked past, I grabbed a cocktail glass from the tray the mini-skirt maid held in one hand. I couldn’t tell what the clear liquid was until I tasted it, but it turned out to be a martini. To be honest, that wasn’t my kind of drink. It was more for a police detective who thought he was hardboiled. Y’know, something that’s more about the atmosphere than the drink. Like black coffee.

“B-but what do we do now? We got on the ship, but it’s pretty big.”

“Yeah, there are one thousand seven hundred beds, so it would take us all night to check each room individually. But the biggest merit of the ship was the heliport to sneak things onto the island, remember? That means Sid Clouds will only be in the areas where he can control the heliport.”

“M-meaning?”

It’s a straight shot from the heliport to the ship’s cargo area. With normal guests and the National Police Agency here, he’s going to hide anything he doesn’t want seen somewhere safe. Reality isn’t as fascinating as a story. Let’s reliably search him out and reliably take him out.”

If we directly ran across him, that would work. But even if we didn’t, we could destroy his equipment or set off a bomb to gather the police’s attention.

At that point, I heard footsteps and saw a group walking boldly down the center of the corridor. They were clearly police bureaucrats, but there was no reason to panic. They would pass right by people like me if we smiled and moved out of the way.

As I did so, I spotted someone pretty famous in the group: Mishima Jun.

Based on his rank insignia, he seemed to be chief superintendent.

“Hm.”

I moved past them without paying too much attention and casually muttered to myself.

“*So he’s still alive.*”

Part 8 (Jinnai Shinobu — Day 10/03 21:10 - 21:20)

Just as the Zashiki Warashi and I were about to head into the casino city, we were caught by Hyakki Yakou’s young leader. It seemed she could see through everything we were doing.

Walking through the neon-filled streets at night with a girl of around ten seemed like too high a hurdle for me, but for the time being, no righteous heroes showed up. Also, I couldn’t even imagine how many bodyguards or other Hyakki Yakou members were hidden in our surroundings.

“It would help if you told me what you intend to do now. Or rather, tell me the specifics of the Singer Song Liar story. I only know the overall outline.”

I answered all her questions while my right temple twitched.

“I’m going to defeat a con artist making a ton of money at the casino. His name is Kodama Ryou. It’s settled with a single round of poker, so it won’t take much time.”

“Is that really necessary to destroy the Amanojaku Package sending lies into realty or to deal with the sale of Japan that is occurring alongside that?”

“We can’t move on until my lost suitcase arrives at the airport, so everything until tomorrow morning is just the lead-up. Give me this much.”

“But…”

“I’ll get it over with quickly. I can’t ignore this one.”

A casino door was thrown open and what looked like three stuffed animals were chucked out.

It was a fox, a tanuki, and a badger.

I caught them all in midair like magic, leaving the Youkai dizzy and confused.

“Wh-what!? Who are you!?”

“That is no way to speak to the kind person who caught us!”

“Mh. I feel a chill running down my spine. Is my natural enemy somewhere nearby?”

Honestly, these things are just as noisy in reality as in the Singer Song Liar story.

Still holding them, I spoke casually.

“Hey, we don’t have all the time in the world, so let’s hurry up and defeat Kodama Ryou to win back the money he stole from the old lady. It’s going to cost a lot to heal the kid suffering from some kind of artificial illness, right?”

This time, the three of them fell silent and looked up at me and the Zashiki Warashi spoke to me from the side.

“Shinobu, you’re talking about finishing him off in a poker game, but a big game in a casino is going to take quite a lot of money. Where are you going to get enough for your initial bet?”

“That’s the thing.”

My temple twitched.

In the Singer Song Liar story, I had brought some fake Jinnai Brewery junmai daiginjo under the assumption Kodama Ryou would notice (although it was really just a way of putting the Zashiki Warashi at ease so I could set her up as the prize), but would that actually work?

Even if reality was following the Singer Song Liar story, there had to be a limit. When I didn’t know how strong the rails were, I couldn’t risk everything on this. The mere fact that I was walking through the casino at this time was a divergence from the original story.

That meant there was a risk of failure.

When the rails led to the sale of Japan, some freedom was certainly desirable, but it brought a dull pressure to my stomach here.

“In other words, if you fail here, you’ll have a few of your organs taken? This is just like a drama.”

“Huh? Ow, ow, ow, ow. Talking about that makes my side prickle, so could you stop it?”

“That didn’t actually happen, so there’s nothing to worry about. Of course, it was overwritten so many times that it would be hard to return history to normal at this point.”

“If we’re talking about ways to settle a debt at a casino, wouldn’t putting a collar on a glamorous symbol of good fortune and selling her at a secret auction house be more appropriate?”

“Ow, ow, ow, ow. Shinobu, talking about that makes my head prickle, so could you stop it?”

“What in the world happened to you before you ended up at our house?”

At that point, the Hyakki Yakou girl reached into her kimono’s sleeve and spoke.

“I’ll settle this.”

“What is that?”

“I can get you up to one billion right away. Just write the amount you need on this check.”

“Wow. I’ve never actually seen someone pull a bunch of money out of their sleeve before. Do you think you’re eccentric beauty Madoka-chan or something!? I’ll have you know that’s a very bourgeois way of having fun!!”

“This is not for fun.” The bob cut girl gave me a composed look. “If you know for certain you will win and you have a means of winning, then isn’t it a safe investment to pile on as much as you can? And any amount of Japanese yen will be meaningless if Japan itself collapses, so hurry up and finish this so we can deal with the real issue.”

I had no choice but to accept her offer.

It didn’t really know how to use it, but I took the first check I had ever been given.

“But we’ve already done a few things different from the Singer Song Liar story, so it seems like there’s a possibility I could lose horribly. No complaining if that happens, okay?”

Hyakki Yakou’s leader started hopping up and down trying to take back the check, but I straightened my back and stretched my arm upwards to keep it out of reach.

Youkai weren’t allowed in the casino and I needed them to set up the magnet trick on the switchboard behind the casino, so only the kimono-wearing girl and I entered the casino.

We walked through the front door.

“Please win!! You decided to do this, so please make sure you win!!”

Surprisingly, the bob cut girl had some tears in her eyes as she waved at me.

As I made my way around the casino, I found the place was filled with familiar scenery even though I had never actually been here before.

I walked down the hall and called a classmate with my cellphone.

“Madoka-chaaan. I’m about to make a ton of money at a casino, so can you contact an accountant and tax advisor for me? I want someone to manage the bank account.”

“Eh? What? I can do that, but can you explain to me how you’re in this situation?”

“Today or tomorrow, something I do might cause a chain reaction in Japan’s exported financial systems which will destroy the world economy and make you really, really mad, but don’t worry. I’m working at keeping that from happening.”

“Shinobu-kun, what hell did you just say?”

Unfortunately, I didn’t have time to explain.

I sat at the same table as the snakeskin man named Kodama Ryou, slammed the check down on the table, and made an announcement to the little con artist.

“Let’s play a game, man-eating snake. I’ll take you out in one go.”

Now.

He was 100% cheating and I already knew I couldn’t win by playing normally, so it was time to see how much I could do in reality when faced with the Usuhiki Warashi Package that swapped out the cards.

Part 9 (Uchimaku Hayabusa — Day 10/03 21:05 - 21:20)

In Harbor Alley, the Mystery Freak (dressed as a bunny) returned to land from the restaurant cruiser that was crammed in with all the others.

There were trivial rumors of boats, helicopters, or long distance swimmers trying to meet up in the “demonic sea”, yet never finding the other person, and three Tokyo residents who had investigated the rumors out of pure curiosity had ended up dead.

Most of the small ships that had left for the “demonic sea” were stored in, serviced at, and left from Harbor Alley.

“What? I guess not all of them are restaurants or food stands.”

As we wandered around, we found something else mixed in among the filthy cruisers. Instead of the aroma of cooking meet or boiling stews, I found one boat that smelled more like solder. In fact, there were a lot like that.

Thinking they all served food had brought a heavy sensation to my stomach, but it looked like that wasn’t the case.

These shops had nothing to do with food.

“This boat is filled with bare speakers, this one is packed full of capacitors and transistors, and this one has…what? Those aren’t lightbulbs. Are they vacuum tubes?”

“Looks like a small electronics marketplace. They’re probably stripping them from somewhere.”

A lot of boxes had “defective” written across them in permanent marker.

It made me want to ask the owner if *any* of the products weren’t defective.

“Why does this shop have dozens of similarly-shaped massagers shoved inside umbrella stands?”

“Eh!? W-well, you know, detective. The women might be too embarrassed to bring those ‘specialized goods’ to the register, so this gives them an excuse that hides their true reasons.”

“?”

“Oh, c’mon! It’s a device that vibrates when you switch it on! Try to imagine why someone would buy that!! Japan doesn’t that have *that* many people with stiff shoulders!!”

For some reason Enbi’s face was beet red.

Hmm. This middle school girl has no problem walking around at night in a bunny suit, so why did this produce such an extreme reaction?

Confused, I looked back at the Mystery Freak, but she did her best to not look me in the eye and used her small hand to frantically fan her heated cheeks.

When she spoke, her voice was more high pitched than usual as if trying to hide something.

“O-ohh, I see. They secretly gather up any defective products before they’re disposed of at the factory. Mass production ensures that there will always be a certain number of these.”

“Hm? How do you know?”

“I-isn’t it obvious!? A completed product has a number printed on it to indicate which factory it was made in. That means it’s a proper piece of electronics. But that part comes last because they don’t want to print the number on defective products they’re only going to reject.”

“And they still work?”

“This is why they’re labelled ‘defective’.”

We looked around a few of the cruisers but didn’t find any useful information.

What were we even supposed to ask about? I couldn’t exactly pull out my police badge to question them about the truth of some rumors and there wasn’t a clear target like Hanako-san or a Kuchisake-Onna. It was nothing more than boats and helicopters not being able to find each other in the nearby ocean. Other than those who actually went out into the sea, the people on the island wouldn’t have noticed anything out of the ordinary.

“Detective, don’t tell you’ve decided this is hopeless and are considering leaving.”

“If you can read my mind that well, I’d prefer you made the much kinder choice of not getting me involved in the first place.”

“You can’t do that!! If you don’t take the investigation part seriously, you’ll pay for it later! You’ll be hit by a metal bat from behind or stabbed in the gut by a fruit knife and realize you’d seen something after all as your consciousness fades away!!”

“This isn’t a mansion mystery where the mountain road is blocked by a landslide, so nothing that harsh is going to happen!!”

“Detective, have you forgotten we’re on a desert island isolated out in the middle of the ocean!?”

“It isn’t a desert island and it isn’t isolated. This is a tourist destination with proper infrastructure!!”

“Not to mention that a genius beautiful mystery-solver and a foolish policeman have come to that island with a meaningful lead-in!! Something’s bound to happen, right!?”

“I’m not even going to bother getting after you for the ‘foolish’ part. I’ll just get right to the point: get away from me! Now that you mention it, you look a lot like the Grim Reaper!!”

The police may be the home of scientific investigation, but even we could be superstitious.

For some reason, the Mystery Freak started trying to hug me, so I grabbed her face and tried to pull her way.

Suddenly, something heavy grazed my nose and made a large dent in the side of the cruiser next to us.

“!?”

Something had flown our way.

I reflexively turned toward the loud noise and saw something fall into the ocean between the boat and the wharf. I only caught a glimpse, but it was about the size of a softball. However, it wasn’t actually one. Even when thrown at 160 kph by a pitching machine, a softball wouldn’t have the destructive power to dent a ship’s hull that was built to withstand collisions with other ships or running aground.

The dent in the cruiser’s hull was the size of a fist, so that was how large the blunt weapon had been.

I guessed it had been a stone.

I couldn’t take this lightly. I seriously doubted it had simply been thrown by hand, so some kind of device had to have been used to throw it. And with that weight and speed, even a fully equipped riot squad would have their helmet and skull split open by a hit to the head or have their ribs utterly crushed through their bulletproof vest by a hit to the chest. In a way, this weapon was more dangerous than a handgun.

“How did they pull that off!?”

“Where are you looking, detective? Don’t look where it hit. You need to look where it was fired from!!”

The Mystery Freak grabbed my shoulders and turned me around.

Harbor Alley had several cruisers placed atop some flat concrete ground in addition to those moored along the wharf. Rather than just having the engine die, those worn-

out boats probably couldn’t even float in the water anymore, so they were being used in place of tents.

I spotted a small figure darting behind one of the cruisers packed in like it was a full parking lot.

Was that a child?

And what was that in their hand?

It had looked like a bow gun. It was seventy to eighty centimeters long. It looked quite large, but part of that would be due to comparing it to the small figure holding it. However, the bow portion was strange. It was not curved like a crescent moon. Like the letter M, a fork-like metal part extended from each side to join with the string.

“We can think about it later! They’ll get away, detective!!”

“Idiot! Don’t run after someone when you don’t know what they’re armed with!!”

I remembered words would never stop her, so I grabbed the Mystery Freak’s arm as she tried to run up ahead and I lightly threw her. I supported her body just before her back hit the concrete ground and I gently lowered her.

“I’ll give chase! You lie here!!”

I began running before she could complain.

Why had this person targeted us so suddenly? Why at that moment? Had they been targeting me or the Mystery Freak? Who even were they? Several questions spiraled through my mind, but I would never answer them if I lost sight of this person.

Despite all the cruisers packed together, there were still narrow pathways like the lines on a Go board. There were a lot of things to hide behind, so it would be easy to lose track of them even at close range, but I was most worried about a surprise attack. To make matters worse, I didn’t have my gun. Unlike in police dramas, detectives didn’t wear a revolver on their hip every day.

I passed by a few cruisers and caught sight of the small back.

Their white shirt stood out in the darkness.

Just when I thought I was going to catch up, the figure turned back toward me.

They accurately aimed the strangely-shaped stone-throwing bow gun and I saw a small flash of red light in the darkness.

A laser pointer!?

“Dammit!!”

As soon as I ducked behind a cruiser, I heard a spectacular dull sound like a frying pan being crushed by an elephant’s foot. The hull of this cruiser had been dented, too. If that had hit me, it would have smashed the bones wherever it had hit.

The plastic hull really scared me. It was probably no weaker than metal, but I had a lot more trouble trusting it.

I guessed they were using stones instead of arrows because of the Minor Offenses Act. Even if they don't violate the Swords and Firearms Control Law, electric drills and spare razor blades technically violated the law if you carried them around "for anything other than their intended purpose", but no one was going to stop someone from picking rocks up off the ground.

And unfortunately, bows did not violate the Swords and Firearms Control Law. No registration was needed to purchase one and no one would get after a kid for making their own arrows by whittling down bamboo with a knife.

But all of that brought a question to mind.

Then what crime am I supposed to accuse them of when I catch up?

I changed my line of thinking when I heard a spine-chilling sound greater than a full swing of a metal bat.

Attempted murder will do nicely!!

Two fist-sized stones had flown my way in quick succession. That meant their plan was not to shoot and run. They may have decided to take me out to make sure they could escape safely and they may have changed their mind after I didn't fire any warning shots with a gun. Perhaps I should have shouted "stop or I'll shoot" even though I didn't have my gun.

"This isn't good…"

A third sound of impact shook my surroundings.

When I instinctually stepped back, I realized the chased and the chaser had swapped positions and a boiling heat filled the bottom of my stomach.

And at that point, I finally noticed something.

My surroundings were very quiet. Too quiet. Even if the cruiser in front of me was a piece of junk, I still would have thought its owners would come running when it was being damaged. Either when eating at the Chinese restaurant or when going around the electronics shops, someone must have informed them that the police were here. Everyone had long since evacuated and then lured me into these hunting grounds.

"But why?"

What was this person so afraid of? Why were they willing to kill me just because I was with the police? Was the Mystery Freak right and Harbor Alley had some great secret? Were the rumors true? Was something more lurking here? Question after question raced through my mind, but one especially large sentence pushed all the others out of the way: then what do I do?

The straining sound of a tightening string hurt my ears.

Most likely, this person was pulling back the string of their special bow gun.

What do I do!? Run? Hide? How far will either of those get me against someone who can fling stones with enough force to smash human bones!?

The straining sound of the string continued.

However, it did not stop. I didn't hear the string catching on the notch from the trigger. Confused, I hesitantly poked my head out to check and I found an odd sight indeed.

First of all, the attacker was a girl with short hair who was about the Mystery Freak's age or possibly even younger. She wore what was not quite a school uniform. The outfit was made up of a sailor shirt and shorts. It looked more like an actual sailor suit than a school's sailor uniform.

"Nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn!!"

The girl had the front of the stone-throwing bow gun pressed against the ground, her feet held a metal ring-like part down, and she was using both hands to pull on the string. Or at least I thought that's what she was trying to do. Really, she was just crouched down and trembling while red in the face.

She must have been really focused on the work because she showed no sign of noticing my movement. She hadn't even noticed that crouching down like that just about gave me a view of her modest chest through the collar of her sailor suit.

Oh, that's right.

When I thought about it, I remembered this was a giant bow gun that fired fist-sized stones with enough force to dent a ship's hull. It would use thick leaf springs and other things to thoroughly strengthen the string and it had no special mechanisms like pulleys or a hand crank, so it seemed unlikely she could pull the string back so many times in a row with those skinny arms.

But…

Um…

Then…

What does this mean?

Can I really walk right up and take that dangerous toy from her?

…No, no.

That can't be it. No, no, no, no, no!! She might finish setting the string and stone the instant I run out and then smash my skull from head-on. Just because she's stupidly crouching over, sticking her shorts-wearing butt backwards, and groaning in an oddly suggestive way doesn't mean I can do anything so reckless! Don't forget that you're in the middle of a life-and-death exchange with a fleeing suspect!! Don't laugh, Hayabusa, you need to keep a straight face!!

I decided to take a more careful route.

I filled my lungs with air and formed a megaphone with my hands.

And then I gave a shout.

“Boo!!!!!”

I immediately saw a sight that was rare even in my life as a detective.

A girl in a short-sleeved sailor suit and shorts had a stone-throwing bow gun pressed against the ground and was holding a metal ring-like part down with her feet while she used both hands to forcibly pull the string upwards.

My shout had caused her shoulders to jump and she hopped up a bit herself.

Her hands were still holding the straining string and she removed her legs from the bow gun itself.

What would happen then?

This was nothing as simple as a “twang”.

It was more of a series of crashes.

The force of the string sent the back end of the bow gun straight up into the girl's jaw as a powerful uppercut. The bow gun itself may have been five or ten kilograms, so it was a weighty blunt weapon of steel and wood.

Her small form collapsed backwards like a toppled mannequin and her legs spread open in an M-shape. The ridiculous pose placed quite a burden on her shorts, but as she didn't look embarrassed or try to squirm, I could only assume she had completely lost consciousness.

All I could do was bring a hand to my forehead.

Part 10 (Hishigami Mai — Day 10/03 21:30 - 21:45)

You could call it a sense of fellowship or an illusion of community, but once you were on the same boat, no one would suspect you. They cheaply assumed that everyone had gone through the same process to be here and thus everything was fine. And yet everyone around them was a complete stranger and they had no idea what any of those people were thinking.

Japan truly is a peaceful nation.

Anyway, the Sunekosuri and I slipped away from the group and down some stairs.

I had memorized the Yakata-II's layout ahead of time, so I knew how to reach the ship's hold on the lower levels and which routes would be the most deserted.

Sid Clouds had to have gathered materials brought in via the heliport to accumulate power for himself. In Japan, he would use Japanese Youkai. In Europe, he would use European fairies.

If what Jinnai Shinobu said was true, he was using a Kechibi and an Ubume.

It was up to luck whether we would reach the Amanojaku at the center of it all or not.

"B-but won't they find it suspicious if they catch you in these worker's corridors or stairways in an open-back dress?"

"There are multiple elevators and stairways. If you take the location of the facilities into consideration, you can figure out where you're more or less likely to run into someone. You know how identical soba stands and convenience stores can be full of customers or completely empty depending on their location, right? This is the same. By noting the probable flow of people based on the layout, it isn't difficult to choose a good route."

"But isn't that an issue of probability and statistics? It's all over if one of the crew comes down this way on a whim."

"Then it comes down to my posture and gait. I drank a disgusting cocktail earlier, so if I claim I'm lost with alcohol on my breath and flushed cheeks, they'll just guide me out of the backyard. Besides, only the control room, engine room, or other facilities directly related to controlling the ship are actually off limits to normal passengers."

Fortunately, I didn't need to put on an act like that.

After descending the metal stairs to the bottom, we arrived at a “large box” with one of the walls missing. It was a floating object with the same area as a small school building. In other words, it was the ship’s hold.

The Sunekosuri spoke up in surprise while rubbing against my shins.

“There are piles of containers everywhere. This doesn’t feel like a luxury cruise ship. It’s more like a rough cargo ship.”

“There are 1700 passengers onboard. If you add in the crew needed to cater to them, a lot of supplies are needed to meet their needs. They probably carry thirty days’ worth of supplies at a time, but with all these containers, it wouldn’t be difficult to slip in an extra one or two.”

Incidentally, this was not the very bottom of the ship.

A device called the ballast tank was even lower. Basically, it was a weight using water. Several giant tanks were lined up and filled with seawater to maintain the ship’s balance when large waves on a stormy night might otherwise capsize it.

“B-but how are we supposed to find the suspicious occult items of Sid Cloud’s plan in all these containers? If we search blindly, it would take more than two weeks.”

I tilted my head and pulled a clump of plastic packaged “clay” from the chest of my dress.

“**If worse comes to worst, can’t we blow up the bottom of the ship to sink the entire thing, onii-chan**☆”

“No, we can’t! And it doesn’t matter how cutely you say it!!”

Well, that was a last resort.

If possible, I wanted to get some data on or traces of what Sid Clouds was trying to do and then get to destroying. And it was unclear how effective sinking the ship would be when it was at port and not out at sea.

“That leaves two methods.”

“Wh-what are they?”

“First, we use the layout to determine what the enemy is thinking. We throw out any optimistic ‘maybes’ or ‘perhapses’ and think about what we would do if we were in the enemy’s shoes and had to make things as difficult as possible for us. We don’t want anyone to find our secret container, but if we put it where no one can reach it, we can’t get to it either. So where in the piles do we put it? We do some profiling and find the right answer.”

“And what’s the second method?”

“That’s simple.” I pointed straight up. “We ask Sid Clouds himself. That would be fastest.”

I heard footsteps as a new figure descended the stairs. I turned that way and the Sunekosuri seemed to hesitantly raise his head. Unless he was intently staring at my panties, he would be looking at the same thing as me.

He had refined gray hair and muscles unbefitting of his age.

He wore a chic suit that seemed to be announcing to the world that his entire outfit was custom made.

He spoke as he stroked his fingertips along the metal railing.

“You knew this would happen.”

“Yeah. First of all, I didn’t have the overwhelming amount of prep time I would need to slip under the great CIA’s radar. However, you can’t exactly send in a group of masked men to the headquarters of your secret plan. I knew Sid Clouds himself or someone under his direct command would show up.”

“So you thought you would capture whoever showed up and get them to talk? That is too crude. And more importantly, too green.”

“But I wasn’t wrong, was I?”

I returned the “clay” to my cleavage.

Still stroking the railing, Sid Clouds calmly descended the stairs.

“I am not trying to teach a monster like you, but normally, the CIA does not dirty our own hands. We infiltrate areas around the world, but we have locals commit the crimes. We give guerrillas and terrorists funding and weapons or we capture mafia drug and weapons sellers so we can have them work for us instead of handing them over to the local justice system.”

He spoke smoothly.

“But I came here personally. Do you know why that is?”

As his fingertips slid along the railing, they *sank down* like a hot knife in butter.

They sank into the metal railing.

“That is because your death was guaranteed from the moment I showed up.”

I heard an unpleasant snapping sound.

It was the sound of him pulling the metal railing from the wall with one hand. The screws holding it in place burst off like buttons from a shirt. The gray-haired man now had a spear with a harsh, jagged end and he did not hesitate to throw it toward us.

In that instant, I was reminded of an imaginary weapon known as a potential energy mass weapon.

A metal column was dropped from satellite orbit to artificially recreate a meteor strike.

“!!”

I ignored the Sunekosuri who had a powerful resistance to purely physical attacks and I jumped to the side with all my strength. A moment later, the ship’s hold shook

and the pile of containers crumbled. I say crumbled, but it looked more like it had been placed on a trampoline and launched upwards.

And this didn't just apply to the ship's hold.

That man caused the eighty thousand ton cruise ship to sink by at least fifty centimeters!

"Don't look away."

His voice was far too close by.

At some point, he had approached within fifty centimeters of me. He had caused all that damage just to jump down and get close.

He used his overwhelming strength as a weapon and crouched down.

"Are you seriously using my breasts' blind spot!?"

We exchanged fists two or three times.

By the time I jumped back, my left arm was dangling unnaturally by my side.

Dammit!! I thought I had let the force escape, but he messed up my joint! My method and timing were perfect, but his base strength is just too high!!

"Didn't I tell you?"

He approached no further and reached for a nearby object.

It was a metal container.

Empty, it would weigh around five hundred kilograms. Packed full, it could reach maybe four tons. Yet he lifted the thing as easily as a plastic umbrella.

And…

"Your death was guaranteed from the moment I showed up."

He threw it.

But he didn't stop there, or even at five or ten of them.

He grabbed everything he could and threw and threw and threw and threw!

It was enough for the ship's hold to rock. Everything shook so much that the giant ship felt unstable. It reminded me of a suspension bridge supported by an old, rusty wire.

"Tch. Are you trying to wear me down!?"

"The States demands certainty above all else, so we naturally end up choosing the least interesting of options."

“Certainty? You mean bringing the Singer Song Liar story into reality and buying Japan? Are you really seeing that ridiculous machine-made story through to the end!?”

“Ha ha. That is a job for the people at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. I really don’t care who stands on the center stage of history. As long as our national interests are protected, that is.”

At any rate, I ran in a large circle around Sid Clouds and avoided the downpour of containers. With that many mass weapons in the air, the small piles located here and there wouldn’t be enough to protect me. Hiding behind one would just get me crushed along with it.

I then turned my attention to his strength.

“The Ubume’s trial, hm? If you can hold the baby to the end as its weight increases infinitely, you gain the Obou-Jikara, right!?”

“You found the answer so soon? I suppose I should expect no less from Japan’s underworld.”

“Take a look at your shadow. It’s got four arms!!”

The legend of the Ubume was generally as follows:

When walking along the road at night, you would find a beautiful woman holding a baby and she would ask you to hold the baby. Now, if you refused, the Ubume herself would kill you.

But if you held the baby, it would grow heavier and heavier for some reason. If you couldn’t keep it up to the end, you would be crushed to death by the baby’s weight. It must have been a famous story at the time because parts of it showed up in the Yuki Onna and Nure Onna stories as well.

But if, in an exceptional case, you managed to hold the baby to the end without being crushed, the Ubume would praise you and give you a special power. That power as known as the Obou-Jikara. There were a number of sayings about that power. For example, some said it let you uproot a great tree on your own and others said it made an illusion of having four arms when used.

In which case…

“Sunekosuri!!”

My circle around Sid Clouds brought me back to the Sunekosuri , so I kicked him up with my toes and caught him in my still-usable right hand.

“(It’s about time I killed that bastard Sid. You’ll be helping.)”

“(Wh-what can I do!? I’m just a small dog!)”

“(No, you’re not. A bullet or a shell wouldn’t kill you. A direct hit from his fist might be trouble, but you can ignore the containers. And so…)”

I whispered some more to him and then threw him to the side.

The containers had been flying like shells from a warship's gun firing at seventy shots per minute, but they stopped.

However, this was not him being kind. He had simply run out of containers within arm's reach.

He cracked his neck and looked my way.

"I think I'll kill that Youkai first. Is that okay?"

"I see you still don't let pride get the better of you. But I'm the one you have to worry about. Looking the other way would be deadly."

I pulled the same "clay" as before from my cleavage, but not a single new wrinkle appeared on his face.

"Do you think a mere five hundred grams is enough to kill me?"

"No, I don't," I answered with a smile. "What matters is that your strength comes from the Ubume legend. That's so very important. After all…*there is no way of overcoming the Ubume's trial."*

Sid Clouds looked to his surroundings.

He seemed to have lost sight of the Sunekosuri's small form. He had thrown the containers around and knocked over all the piles of them, so there was plenty of wreckage large enough to hide something the size of a stuffed animal.

"The only way to save yourself from the Ubume's trial is to stick a short sword blade-up in the ground before accepting the challenge. If you're crushed by the baby's weight, it will be skewered by the blade, so the Ubume is forced to interrupt the trial before it's over."

The gray-haired man kicked up a container from the floor, grabbed it, and tossed it straight up. The gravity-defying guillotine destroyed the sprinkler on the ceiling far above and scattered water over the entire area.

"In other words, no one can complete it. There is no answer to the Ubume's trial. What does it even mean to keep holding it 'to the end'? What if the Ubume waits for a full century? *So you used some kind of trick to make sure you weren't crushed by the weight even if you couldn't complete the trial.* So if I pull out that prop, won't you be crushed by the baby's ever-increasing weight?"

Without batting an eye, Sid Clouds made an announcement in the artificial downpour.

"I will fill this water with an electric current."

"That won't kill the Sunekosuri."

"But the electricity will be diverted around him. If I measure that anomaly, I can locate him."

Tch. He really is clever.

Your average member of the underworld would have given up on the Sunekosuri. And even if not, I would have been able to redirect their focus back to me. But that wasn't going to work here. He was going to use all of his strength to thoroughly crush the tiny doubt budding in his mind. He did not falter in the slightest, so there was no opening for me to attack.

However…

"Then how about I buy some time?"

"How?"

I charged straight toward him. He breathed lightly from his nose and our arms and legs intersected. I was more skilled, but his strength was far greater. In the blink of an eye, I heard several dull sounds. He grabbed my neck and held me up in the air.

He did not even make a victorious comment.

With the heavy sound of a solid hit from a metal bat, my body flew forcefully to the side. I slammed into the wall and crushed a thick power cable surrounded in a metal covering. I heard a zap and my vision was dyed in pure white.

"Gh…bah!!"

But more importantly, the current would flow through the water covering the floor and Sid Clouds would locate the Sunekosuri.

He had not bothered going through the process needed to kill the human named Hishigami Mai.

He had simply woven my actions in as a step in his plan to kill the Sunekosuri.

"There."

Sid Clouds accurately turned his head and I weakly opened my mouth while slipping down to the bottom of the wall.

"By the way, was the ballast tank the right answer?"

That space took in tons of seawater to create a great weight that kept the ship from capsizing on stormy nights and it was located even further down than the ship's hold.

The gray-haired man said nothing, but I heard him cutting across the pile of rubble that the ship's hold had become.

"The Ubume kills people with the weight of its baby. Anyone who can't take the weight is crushed to the ground along with the baby. That makes a floating cruise ship perfect. The large ship can withstand eighty thousand tons, *so it can continue to float without ever letting the baby touch the bottom of the ocean.*"

His silent eyes seemed to say "so what?", but he suddenly came to a stop.

"You don't want anyone to know about the baby, so the ballast tank full of seawater would be best. It's surrounded by thick walls, it's dangerous, and no one has any reason to go there, so you can hide whatever you want there. And if I know that, it's not too difficult to deal with."

“Wait.”

“If I throw some explosives into the ballast tank and blow a hole in the bottom of the ship, the baby will fall into the ocean. And if it reaches the bottom, your delayed Ubume trial will finally end!!”

“Where did that ‘clay’ you had go!?”

How naïve.

There was only ever one bomb. All I asked of the Sunekosuri was to open the ballast tank’s maintenance cover. If I honestly asked him to help me blow up the ship, that pacifist never would have helped.

And you focused so much on efficiency that you threw me horizontally across the ship’s hold to break the power cable on the wall. However, that wasn’t unexpected. I threw out any vague optimistic ‘maybes’, ‘perhapses’, and ‘surely he wouldn’ts’ and I thought about what I would do in your shoes if I had to make things as difficult as possible for me. Doing that naturally showed me what your future decisions would be.

I just had to think about what I would have done.

And what if I let go of an explosive with fuse attached while I was thrown through the air?

It’s time you found the answer, you idiot.

A tremendous heavy vibration shot up from the ballast tank below.

“Bh…gh…!!!???”

I heard a dull sound. It was an unpleasant sound like a large tree breaking between giant gears. It came from Sid Clouds’s spine. That bone made up from a series of smaller bones had its connections snapped apart. The weight being forcibly propped up by the eighty thousand ton displacement of the cruise ship was bearing down on that human frame, so his fate was sealed.

I slowly got up, pressed my right hand to my left shoulder, and heard a dull cracking sound.

“Give it up. There’s no saving you. And if you have nothing to protect, could you tell me the truth behind all this?”

“Not…y-yet… I-I…still…”

You’re kidding, right?

I heard a ton of thin fibers snapping as Sid Clouds continued standing without being crushed. I estimated the weight at around five hundred kilograms or maybe over a ton. Based on the records leftover from the cruel tortures of the medieval Europe that everyone knew from their RPGs, a victim lying face up could have weight slowly added up to about three hundred kilograms without dying from shock, but this was clearly past that limit.

“The baby’s weight…is crushing me. But you know what? Even if it isn’t complete…I still received the Obou-Jikara… So I can push it back. I can push back on the baby’s weight…with these abnormal muscle fibers.”

“Oh, honestly!!”

My mind turned toward the handgun hidden in my boot.

No, that wouldn’t work. If he can bear a weight of over a ton, his muscles have to be as tough as a concrete pillar. I used my “clay” already and a lead bullet would just bounce off.

Honestly. I’m really reaching for the Deadly Dragon Princess here!?

“I don’t have time for an interrogation, so I’ll ask once and you have one chance to answer me. Will you fall back here or will you continue? Choose whichever one you want. Depending on your answer, I might have to bring out the power tools.”

“Ha ha,” he laughed.

The burden on his body seemed to be a serious issue because his body was splitting open in places and his clothes were soaked with blood.

“Fall back here? If you like. We were holding out a helping hand for your country, but I suppose the freedom to bat that hand aside is part of national sovereignty. It might be fun to switch to a different progress manual and instead prepare to watch the blue light from safety.”

“?”

“But even if I fall back, it won’t stop her. You know that I always have someone even more powerful working under me, don’t you? I had hoped to use her as an emergency exit, but since she hasn’t shown up, she must be prioritizing the operation.”

I could not kill him and he could not take even a single step because of the great weight.

Even in our impasse, his bloody lips maintained a smile.

“She is powerful.”

“*Even more than this*?”

I couldn’t help but sound annoyed and his eyes narrowed as if he had wanted to hear that annoyance.

“I chose her, so she is definitely more powerful than me. Now that she has focused all of her resources on the operation, it is guaranteed to succeed.”

It looked like we were on separate parallel lines, but in our world, there was always a conclusion.

In this case, it came in the form of bullets.

That conclusion struck Sid Clouds once each in the head, the chest, and the gut.

But I hadn’t done it.

For one, no normal bullet could do anything to him. To take advantage of the Ubume’s weakness, it may have been forged from the same carbon steel as a Japanese sword.

One glance at the surprised look on Sid Clouds’s face was enough to know who had fired that magical bullet.

“…Ah…”

But he was not allowed to speak even a word.

As soon as his eyes rolled back in his head and he fainted, the final pillar was broken. A multitude of wet squishing sounds followed. That human form was crushed under a massive weight and made the dramatic transformation into a dark red stain spreading on the floor.

However…

“W-w-w-wah!? M-Mai-Mai-san!! Look!!”

“Oh, dear. Even after being crushed that badly, he’s still breathing. Just how tough is that Obou-Jikara?”

Even as a dark red slug-like creature measuring one hundred eighty centimeters, Sid Clouds continued to squirm.

This is hopeless. I should assume this guy isn’t going to die even if you kill him. I get the feeling he’d be back for revenge if someone dragged the Ubume’s baby up from the ocean bottom with a ship’s salvage crane.

But that wasn’t what I needed to focus on. Whatever the details, he couldn’t move now, so I could put him off until later.

I had to look up above.

I heard some light departing footsteps and I caught a glimpse of a maid uniform’s fluttering short skirt at the top of the stairs Sid Clouds had destroyed.

“That’s some fancy underwear. …Looks like she really doesn’t understand the concept of a maid.”

A handgun in the garter and spare magazines covering the underside of the skirt was far too exciting for a tidy and kind maid.

At any rate, this was the waitress I had taken a cocktail from while passing her by in the ship. She was apparently the CIA’s final boss. Since she was supposed to be stronger than Sid Clouds who was still moving after all that, it was sounding like a lot of trouble.

Part 11 (Jinnai Shinobu — Day 10/03 21:40 - 22:00)

The casino hall was wrapped in crazed excitement.

He really had fallen for it. In the Singer Song Liar story, I had easily established the ten thousand times multiplier penalty with my cheating bluff and by making him think the noise on the card reader was due to skimming, but in reality, it took a while after the game came to an end. After all, Kodama Ryou just kept complaining. When I thought about it, it was obvious, though. This wasn’t the score in a video game. We were talking about someone’s life and everything they owned. Even if he had gotten it all by dirty means.

“Ah…ahhh…aaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh…”

The man before me had been robbed of the perfect order of his hair, clothes, expression, and aura and a noise I couldn’t quite call a voice escaped his mouth without end.

It had all turned out the same.

It was as if everything were following the story I had made and anything that didn’t fit was being corrected.

“Hey.”

I called out to the con artist who had fallen to his knees.

He didn’t respond, so I grabbed his collar with one hand and forced him up.

“Hey!”

“What…? Do you still want more after all that!?”

That’s right, you idiot.

Normally, I'd want to leave trash like you to die, but I can't.

I felt a twitch in my right temple as I spoke to the con artist.

"At this rate, you'll be killed by midday tomorrow."

"…What?"

"You'll be killed by an Ikiryou assassination Package using a Youkai called a Kechibi. It was assembled by the CIA. I know this probably sounds like something out of a movie, but you can choose how to use the time you have left. You can believe me and struggle to survive or laugh at me and be killed. It's your choice."

"Wait. Wh-what are you talking about? Who are you?"

"As I said, you can choose how to use the time you have left."

I practically threw my words at that greasy loser from close range.

"But the current situation isn't normal. There's no other way a normal high school boy could win everything a professional con artist owns. So how about you catch on that something dangerous is brewing on a much deeper level than you think?"

That was when my cellphone rang in my pocket.

I let go of the con artist's collar, turned around, and pulled out the phone.

"H-hey!! What am I supposed to do!? What do you mean I'll be killed? Are you saying my despair still isn't over!?"

He shouted something at me, but there was nothing more I could do.

I wasn't even sure I could stop the Singer Song Liar story I had created. And if I didn't, he would be assassinated at a set time and place no matter where he tried to hide.

That meant I could only keep moving.

I answered the phone and held it to my ear.

"Madoka?"

"Shinobu-kun, do you have any idea what you've gotten yourself involved in?"

That was faster than expected.

'This only happened at dawn in the Singer Song Liar story.

Should I rejoice at the change or will this lead to an even worse conclusion?

"You mean the collapse of the world economy due to Japan's exported financial systems, the Japanese yen becoming scrap paper, and the sale of Japan in the name of supporting its recovery, right? Unfortunately, I've been placed in the very center of all that."

"Shinobu-kun…"

“Sorry, but I’m the one that was placed ‘here’,” I said to cut her off. “Only someone ‘here’ can stop this, so instead of complaining, why don’t you help me? Have you contacted an accountant and tax adviser yet? I defeated the con artist named Kodama Ryou and won a ton of money. Although it is all Japanese yen which might be worthless this time tomorrow. I want to return it to the people he victimized. Can you help me with that?”

“I can, but do you really have time to get sidetracked with this?”

“I’m about to get started here. To be honest, I had to bait the hook before I could make my counterattack. Getting sidetracked here was necessary.”

After exchanging the necessary information, I ended the call with Madoka.

Depending on what happens, this might be our last conversation.

“Um, it’s Hafuri, right? I’m done here, so let’s get out of here.”

“Sigh… I’m glad you settled that with the original money still intact. Then again, we can’t have this all continuing ‘as planned’, so it’s a bit of a complicated feeling.”

We left the casino’s front entrance and the fox, tanuki, and badger hopped out of hiding. The Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata gave me an exasperated look.

“S-so how did it turn out?”

“Did it all go well?”

“After showing off like that, it would be no laughing matter if you lost everything!!”

The three noisy animals wouldn’t stop yelling, so I just shoved a folded memo toward them.

The tanuki gave hysterical shout.

“Kyah! Wh-what is this?”

“The phone number of the accountant managing the bank account. Call this number with the old lady once you get home. You can ask that accountant about the money you need. Don’t think about moving the money yourself. Leave it to the professional and you won’t be tricked again.”

I shoved it up against them.

“Don’t lose this, don’t show it to anyone, and hurry back to the old lady who must be worried sick that you suddenly vanished. That will settle everything.”

I left the three Youkai blinking in confusion and walked away from the casino with the Zashiki Warashi and Hyakki Yakou’s girl leader.

“Shinobu, volunteering for good deeds is fine, but what do we do now?”

“I can only tell you ‘what’s going to happen’.”

My right temple itched and I shrugged.

“In the Singer Song Liar story, we had a celebration party until past dawn and then a car bomb exploded on the early morning road. You carried me, we escaped into the mine, and the entire tunnel was blown up. …That much probably can’t be changed. Even if the details are a little different, we’ll still be attacked come morning and you’ll be taken hostage. And all to have me retrieve my lost suitcase.”

“Shinobu, that sounds like a pain in the ass. Do you really think I’ll do that?”

“But you did. Maybe once it actually happens, you’ll have a change of heart and decide to act out of character.”

Even I thought my tone was a little too careless.

“The car bomb is one thing, but that mountain has as many tunnels as an ant colony and it has to take a while to rig it all up with explosives. They attack in the morning, so they’re probably doing a final check of the mine right now. I don’t know how far in advance they set up the explosives, but they at least need to make sure the detonation signal can get in before they arm it. They were an unknown enemy until the very end of the Singer Song Liar story, but if we head to the mine now, we can run across them.”

On top of that, I had a feeling they had only decided to take an obvious hostage after I defeated Kodama Ryou, who had a connection with them. I had shown them they couldn’t let their guard down with me, so they had been forced to take a Youkai hostage which was probably more difficult than capturing a lion alive. For them, that had been the last card they had wanted to play.

“Not a bad idea,” said the Hyakki Yakou leader with a composed expression. “Then how about I contact my organization and have them make a quick attack?”

“You’re sounding dangerous again.”

The normally arrogant Zashiki Warashi began casually keeping some distance from the small girl.

Meanwhile, the leader girl did not seem to mind.

“I am their highest leader, so whether in a crowd or the dark, I always have a certain minimum force prepared.”

She pressed a hand to her ear and I assumed she was putting on a small headset, but…

“…Huh?”

“Hey, why do you sound so confused? Please don’t tell me you can’t contact anyone.”

“No, that shouldn’t be… How strange. Our standard security structure should prevent this from happening.”

I couldn’t help but hold my head in my hands.

It seemed the Singer Song Liar story was more powerful than I had imagined. Had the girl’s bodyguards’ equipment simply failed or had they been attacked by our enemies without anyone noticing? Both possibilities should never have been able to

happen with Hyakki Yakou, supposedly the nation's most powerful paranormal organization.

I was reminded of the fancy hotel in northern Fuuka Village where I had had my first encounter with Hyakki Yakou.

Then too, a Package had prophesied a slaughter and I was tossed around by that Package from beginning to end.

"I guess we have to do whatever we can," I spat out as my right temple twitched. "Either way, we'll be attacked come morning if we just wait around. No matter what we do, it can't be worse than that."

Part 12 (Uchimaku Hayabusa — Day 10/03 21:35 - 22:10)

After the Mystery Freak caught up, we both looked down on the suspect sprawled out on the ground with her eyes spinning.

Looking at her again, I realized she was even skinnier than Enbi. Her short-sleeve sailor shirt was not quite like a school uniform and her hot pants were so short you could just about see the base of her thighs. The string to the stone-throwing bow gun she had been using as a weapon must have been really hard to pull back because her palms were scraped red.

"What did you do, detective? A punch of justice against a minor girl? That must have felt really good."

"Stop it, idiot. She took herself out. …Although it is true I led her in that direction."

I heard a groan from the girl stretched out on the ground.

The first thing I did was present her with despair.

"This is the police."

"Detective, did you forget your badge?"

"A badge from the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department has no effect outside the city and you don't need a badge when you catch them in the act."

I heard a great shriek and the girl started looking restlessly around, so I kicked the bow gun away.

"A-ah, ah, ah, ah…"

"Give me your name, address, and occupation."

"I-if I tell you, will you let me go? Heh. Eh heh heh."

"No actual harm was done to me, so this can be settled with a simple obstruction of justice charge. That probably means a summary indictment and a fine of ten thousand yen. But if you prefer something more adolescent and cool-sounding, then maybe I should alter my interpretation of what happened. For example, that could have been attempted murder or a terrorist attack against the National Police Agency's casino inspection team."

“O-okay!? M-my name is Kozakura Sobiki! I’ll tell you!! I’ll tell you everything!!”

The girl had tears in her eyes as she flailed her arms around.

“We…you see, um, eh heh heh, we specialize in hardware cracking.”

“Cracking?”

“Detective, she means illegal ROMs for pachinko parlors or illegally skimming credit card data. Instead of using data or viruses, she’s an information criminal that uses physical devices.”

“L-lately we’ve started messing with cables too.”

This must have been awkward for her because Kozakura Sobiki wouldn’t look me in the eye and pressed her index fingers together in front of her chest.

“Y’know, like the lines connecting ATMs to banks or the cable TV selectors on telephone poles.”

“Oh? Don’t those things have a metal web thinner than a hair woven into the outer covering? I thought the security company was notified as soon that outer covering was broken.”

“No, no, no. Have you ever heard of alien crosstalk? If it isn’t fiber optic, the electrical signal will disturb the magnetic field around the cable. Even if you don’t break the covering and expose the metal wire, you can still attach a wiretap line right along that covering to steal the data-…”

“……
……”

“…is what I’ve heard you might be able to do!! Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

My irritation must have gotten through to her because Kozakura Sobiki made a harsh course correction mid-sentence.

“The latest trend is the undersea cables. While city lines spread out like a spider web, there’s pretty much just the one going undersea. If you suck the data out of there, you can steal allll the communications from an entire city or even an entire nation. …Well, that’s the theory anyway. It’s just, um, hypothetical.”

“And?”

Oops.

Even I could tell my voice had dropped lower than necessary.

“Can you blame me for being scared!? I just got done working on the only line running from this island to the mainland and then a plainclothes cop shows up in the waterside electronics marketplace. I don’t think the people who are going to use the line would betray us, but I was certain it was an assassin with a fake police badge coming to silence me!!”

“Wait a second,” I cut in. “ ‘The people who are going to use the line’?”

“Uh.”

“You mean you weren’t working alone?”

“Yessss!!”

She must have gotten desperate because Kozakura Sobiki collapsed backwards and started flailing her limbs around and shouting.

Of course, I hadn’t gone through the proper process for interrogating her, so I had no right to keep her here against her will.

“The locals and the entertainment companies are fighting over whether to preserve or develop the mining island. They wanted me to attach a wiretap to the undersea cable so they could steal and destroy the data, so, well, it seemed like they wanted to destroy the relationship between the casinos and the card companies.”

“(So was she hired by the locals?)”

“(Only if whoever hired her was being honest.)”

“I don’t think it was them,” readily cut in Kozakura Sobiki. “Based on their interests, the locals would make the most sense, but the payment method was just too complex to be them. I don’t know who, but I think someone else was trying to interfere with the locals’ plan. It looks like they’re stealing a pre-existing criminal plan so the crime can be safely pinned on the locals while whoever it is does whatever they want.”

Wait, wait, wait.

Stealing the data sent between the casinos and the card companies was a big enough deal on its own. After all, that could easily destroy the island’s entire source of income. But was there something else beyond that?

The Mystery Freak cut in from the side.

“Hey, hey. What was the original plan? What were the locals trying to do and what were they trying to steal?”

“I don’t know that. All I did was take the wiretap they gave me and attach it to the undersea cable. But…”

“But?”

“Heh. Eh heh heh. I actually opened up the wiretap unit before attaching it. Y-you see, you have to teach yourself in this business, so you can learn a lot from someone else’s tech! And there was something clearly unnecessary stuffed in there along with the necessary equipment.”

“What was that?”

“At first, I thought it was a cylindrical coil, but it was actually a really old kind of money! That really made me mad. That had to be over seventy percent of the thing’s weight!! But when I thought about it later, I realized it might be an occult object meant to interfere with a criminal Package involving a Youkai.”

I brought a hand to my head.

If that was true, this had just gotten all the more troublesome.

“What Youkai has a connection to old money?”

“There are far too many for that to be useful,” said the Mystery Freak. “There’s the tanuki and foxes, the Onbu-Obake, the god of poverty, and pretty much all of the Zashiki Warashi types. For example, it could be an Usuhiki Warashi or a Notabariko.”

“Anyway,” said Kozakura Sobiki. “After I’d finished that job, a suspicious person claiming to be with the police showed up, so I thought they were trying to silence me. I thought they had found out I opened the wiretap unit or that I’d seen ‘that’.”

There’s still more?

Annoyed, I asked what she meant.

“And what is ‘that’?”

“Well, I’m not entirely sure myself, but…”

Part 13 (Hishigami Mai — Day 10/03 22:19 - 22:45)

Wow, I’m soaking wet!!

After the excitement of Sid Clouds making a lot of noise throwing containers everywhere and him being crushed into mincemeat on the floor, I had decided there was no chance of making a quiet escape. Instead, I entered the ballast tank, closed the maintenance cover, swam out the large hole in the bottom, and climbed up onto the port.

“Nn…kh.”

I used a needle and thread to sew up all the lacerations on my body and covered up the wounds themselves with the kit inside my makeup pouch.

That left doing something about the wrist and elbow of my dominant arm.

“Ahhh… Khhn…!”

“Why are you shouting in such a needlessly suggestive way!?”

“It’s a quick way of getting rid of the pain. It’s healthier than using morphine.”

After a series of dull sounds like the shifting of a manual transmission’s shift lever, my joints moved back into place. For anyplace that was split or missing, I used a dropper to fill them with a repairing liquid.

I really was torn up this time. And I have to be prepared for even more damage against that maid. Realistically, I should probably expect to have my heart stopped for a few seconds.

Since the final test was coming up, I stripped off the dress and changed into my original tank top and hot pants.

“Well, I dealt with the Ikiryou assassination Package using a Kechibi, so I think I’ll give myself more than fifty points.”

After shaking the seawater off, the Sunekosuri asked me a confused question.

“Eh? I know you dealt with Sid himself, but how did you do anything to the Package?”

“According to Jinnai Shinobu’s explanation, the Kechibi Package follows the target’s footsteps to find them and then the criminal kills them using the fact that damage to their Ikiryou also damages the person. The Kechibi isn’t a simple Ikiryou. It’s a special type you have to summon by rubbing the sandal bottoms together. In this case, the sandal footprints were one’s footsteps on the internet. By combining multiple types of big data, they can pinpoint an individual when they shouldn’t be able to.”

“I-I see…?”

“In addition to the normal casinos, Goldmine Island has Heavy Cruiser Island, a VR casino city where people can walk around and gamble with their avatar. It’s linked with a monster of a point card that has over forty million users and is accepted at drugstores, video rental stores, and online stores. It’s mostly done using a kind of data seen as a virtual currency.”

“What are you getting at?”

“You don’t get it? Something that large will have countless companies affiliated with them and can spread their sales far and wide. Everything from airplane tickets and hotel reservations to convenience stores and vending machines. So if you look through the purchase history, you can easily turn up an individual’s location.”

This of course had nothing to do with me since I used a fake name and not even I knew my real name.

“Y-you mean by combining the big data of multiple companies, they have a system to ‘regain’ the ability to search for an individual even though big data is made so you can’t link the data to an individual?”

“That’s really the whole point of the point card. It looks like a way of saving some money, but it’s actually an efficient system of gathering people’s purchasing information. The young wives smiling innocently at their receipts probably have no idea the kind of price tag human information has.”

I then gave the Sunekosuri a casual quiz.

“Anyway, let’s say they have a system of locating an individual from the chaotic pool of big data. They would need a massive information processing system that could use…no, misuse that to instantly search out a name from all the data. Now, where would the communication center for that be located?”

“Um, didn’t we head down to the ship’s hold to find the Kechibi itself? And it didn’t look like you ever found the correct container.”

“True, but there was a huge parabolic antenna on top of the ship. That was for communicating with a satellite. And from what I saw of the ship, it had a luxurious casino of its own. It was a large facility, but only a limited number of VIPs get to use

it. They need giant servers to check on those VIPs' cards, but the servers would be mostly unused. That means they can be used for information processing they don't want anyone to know about."

"Th-then…"

"I messed with the wiring just a bit before leaving the ship. A surge of electricity will be frying all of the ship's electronics right about now. And if the servers don't work, the Kechibi may still be there, but it can't follow anyone's 'footsteps'. It's just like you don't need to fear a gun with a broken sight no matter how much ammo it has."

"Y-you did all that in that limited time? Shudder."

"You can't leave with anything left undone, so a professional has to achieve results in the limited time they have."

Now, then.

I was worried about the maid who had given up on Sid and run off, but I had to review the current power balance first.

Overall, there were two forces on Goldmine Island.

One side had obtained the Usuhiki Warashi Package, but wanted to stop it now that it was clearly leaving their control. They were probably the locals who were displeased with the policies of the casinos.

The other side was the CIA who had taken over the Usuhiki Warashi Package and was misusing it to arrive at the sale of Japan. They wanted to send the Usuhiki Warashi out of control even it meant slaughtering the locals with the Kechibi Package or the Ubume's Obou-Jikara.

We had just crushed Sid Clouds of the CIA and his Kechibi Package, so the locals would be getting more active.

Now, what exactly should I do now?

"Well, I doubt the CIA maid is going to sit idly by just because they had their superior position taken from them. That type will use an embassy, a consulate, or a military base to 'legitimately' return home if things start getting dangerous. Since she's still in hiding, she must still be motivated. That means she'll try to reverse what we've done, even if she has to force it."

"But you took out that muscular Sid guy and the Kechibi Package, right? D-do they still have some other secret weapon!?"

"Of course they do. And it's their biggest one."

Mh, my tank top is sticking to me more than usual. Is it because of the seawater?

"The Amanojaku. That final weapon bends reality in accordance with Singer Song Liar's automatically created story. Even now, it must be optimizing everything, but I bet that maid will overclock the thing to boost its ability to change the flow of events. If so, she'll need direct contact with the Amanojaku's core."

"The Amanojaku's…core?"

The Sunekosuri scratched his ear with his back leg.

“Ah! You mean that Jinnai Shinobu boy!?”

“Yes, that’s part of it,” I agreed. “But he’s probably just the key. There’s also a keyhole to stick that key in. But where are the actual ceremonial grounds? It has to have a constant connection to Jinnai Shinobu, it has to be overwritten with a collection of lies that symbolize the Amanojaku, and yet it has to be completely hidden from our eyes.”

“Wouldn’t that be the story Jinnai Shinobu created?”

“You mean they left it up to the automatic creation software? That would be too unstable for a Youkai’s permanent location. But what other symbol of lies is there? The virtual world? But the VR casino city is already part of the Usuhiki Warashi’s framework, so using that would add the risk of a conflict between them. Maybe it could be a restaurant that lies about the source of its food or a replica hot spring with no real benefit? I’m not sure what it could be at this point.”

“Then…”

“Either way, the maid will definitely be approaching Jinnai Shinobu. It looks like we can only wait until then to intercept her. If she takes him away, she’ll have us in checkmate.”

Didn’t he go with Hyakki Yakou’s young lady?

That meant I could contact her to figure out where he was, but I was a little worried about taking action before I had all the necessary pieces of the puzzle.

I looked reluctantly up at the moon in the night sky, tried to think more about the Amanojaku’s location, and suddenly noticed something odd.

“Huh?

I had a thought as I looked up at the moon.

Could it be…?

Part 14 (Jinnai Shinobu — Day 10/03 22:10 - 22:40)

The Zashiki Warashi, Hyakki Yakou’s leader girl, and I left the neon-filled casino city and made our way to the mountain in the center of the island. All of the light faded away and we were surrounded by pitch black shadows that covered the entire area. The pineapple-like tropical trees and the few maple and gingko trees adding some red or yellow all looked like a single pitch-black mass.

“Damn. …This is a hell of a place.”

I used the back of my hand to wipe away the sweat that had dripped from my forehead to my jaw.

My right temple itched.

We had followed an animal trail based on the scenery I knew from the Singer Song Liar story, but actually doing the walking wore me out quite a lot. I was wearing sports shoes, so it had to be even worse for someone in a kimono.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“Being surrounded by nature like this is actually more comfortable for me.”

“I’m not worried about you and your infinite stamina. This girl is only about ten, you know?”

“I-I am the leader of Hyakki Yakou, so I can walk a mountain trail on my own. I am not asking you to carry me.”

“You’re so exhausted that you’re letting slip what you really want. C’mon, Miss Infinite Stamina.”

“What are you talking about? This is clearly a job for a guy.”

We ended up playing rock paper scissors and the Zashiki Warashi pinned me down even though I won. I was held in a bizarre Boston crab by a beautiful Youkai in a red yukata and I knew I couldn’t allow a folklorist to record the scene as a new Japanese legend.

“W-wait. Vahhh!? I give!! I give!!”

“Shinobu, you’re supposed to tearfully proclaim that having an unrivalled beauty’s butt sitting on you is the greatest reward.”

“You’re strength is far, *far* too much for that!! I’m going to burst open like something from a sausage commercial!!”

“And what do you say about our game?”

“I lose!! I’ll carry her or anything you want!!”

Even after I was released, I lay trembling on the ground for a while.

With a few mystery leaves in my hair and on my clothes, I was forced to carry a girl who was more frightening than a mafia boss.

Girls are a lot lighter than I expected, I thought as my endorphins gave me that happy illusion, but when I thought of her as simple baggage, I found she was actually incredibly heavy.

At any rate, we continued through the forest.

After walking a bit, we came across a steep slope. The forest was becoming a mountain. The smells reaching my nose also changed from greenery to a chocking scent of black soil.

After climbing the slope for over ten minutes, the trees thinned out and the scenery opened up.

I hurriedly took a step back and checked on the situation from a thicket.

The exposed dirt of the slope contained a two meter hole that looked hand-dug and a few short cabins were located around it. They were probably rest areas for the miners and storage for the digging equipment. There was dim light on in one of the cabins and I could make out several figures moving to and from the tunnel.

My right temple itched again.

“I recognize one of them,” I whispered. “He was in the Singer Song Liar story.”

I had only read it as text, but it had been detailed enough to have a clear picture in my head.

“After the Zashiki Warashi was taken hostage, I ran across these people in the airport. These must be the locals and this must be where they normally work.”

If they were moving back and forth between the cabin and the tunnel, they had to be carrying the explosives and wiring into the tunnels.

The action was filled with malice, but they looked much livelier sweating and moving around than they did sneaking through the carefully maintained airport. They looked like fish in water.

“What are you going to do?”

For some reason, Hyakki Yakou’s leader did not ask to be lowered from my back, but she did whisper to me as if naturally breathing into my ear.

“There are two forces on this island. The locals prepared the Usuhiki Warashi – a Zashiki Warashi subspecies – Package on their own but are desperate to seal it away. The CIA wants to misuse that Package. …However, it wouldn’t be safe to just ignore the locals. If they completed a safety device and fully suppressed the out-of-control Usuhiki Warashi, they would probably get greedy again.”

“If everything is following the timeline, I’ll be buried alive before that.”

That meant I had to do something before they had finished their preparations.

But then the Good-for-Nothing Zashiki Warashi threw cold water on my hopes.

“But Shinobu, there are a lot of them and they have pickaxes, hammers, large drills and other excavation equipment, and even explosives. If an unarmed high school boy rushes in there giving a battle cry, I think he’ll only be turned to mincemeat, so how exactly are you going to safely make them surrender?”

Huh?

Come to think of it, what am *I going to do?*

“Can’t I just rely on a wonderful Youkai that can’t be harmed by physical attacks?”

“Please don’t joke. Why would I do something like that?”

She bluntly refused me!!

But what am I supposed to do? Even if she does get motivated, we’re still outnumbered. We’ll be right back to square one if they capture Hyakki Yakou’s leader and me while the Zashiki Warashi charges the enemy. And having the girl taken hostage would be especially bad. The scale of the problem could grow even more hopelessly large than in the Singer Song Liar story.

What should I do?

What should I do?

What should I do?

“No, wait…”

“?”

“Zashiki Warashi, you stay with the girl. If it comes to it, you two run.”

“Nn…”

“Why is this Hafuri girl moaning on my back!? If you’re going to fall asleep, do it on the Good-for-Nothing Youkai’s back!”

Hm. She might have divinely inspired skill at moving pieces on the board, but she may not be very good at running around on the scene herself.

“What are you going to do?”

I answered the Zashiki Warashi’s question honestly.

“What I can.”

Part 15 (3rd person — Day 10/03 23:00 - 23:05)

“She” ran through the dark forest.

She wore a maid uniform with a short skirt and shiny enamel shoes. She looked horribly out of place on a mountain, but she did not show any kind of handicap. Like a wild beast of the forest, she nimbly and smoothly made her way to her destination while becoming one with the night and suppressing any sound or other sign of her presence.

The fluttering of her short brown hair showed the flow of the night wind.

Her goal was clear: Jinnai Shinobu.

He was the key to it all. He had been randomly chosen from the great number of people visiting Goldmine Island. Instead of using a chosen VIP and isolating them, they had placed the core on a normal, unrelated individual and then released them. They had decided that letting it dissolve into the sea of information would reduce the risk of interference, but she now had to contact Jinnai Shinobu again.

This was like extracting information on a specific individual from a massive pool of big data.

If she got her hands on Jinnai Shinobu, she could reverse the damage done. The situation had left the predetermined rails, but she would be able to forcibly bring it all back on track.

And she could take full credit for the victory.

That was why she made her way to Jinnai Shinobu.

She had to continue the preparations for buying Japan so that they could reach for the blue light which was their goal.

Part 16 (Jinnai Shinobu — Day 10/03 22:45 - 22:55)

The enemies were the locals who opposed the casino policy.

From what I could see, there were at least more than ten of them. Once those working inside the tunnel or cabins came out, there was no telling how many there would be.

I expected their weapons to be shovels, pickaxes, hammers, excavation tools like large drills and continuous vibration drill rods, and even explosives for blasting. Needless to say, any tool meant to break through solid bedrock would turn a flesh-and-blood high schooler into mincemeat.

Meanwhile, I only had myself, a single high schooler, to work with.

The only weapon I could hope to get was a rock or stick found on the ground. Even if they didn’t have any of their weapons, it was still entirely possible I’d be beaten to a pulp.

So what was I to do?

My right temple itched. If I was caught here and they were able to tell me what to do, it would all lead to the conclusion seen in the Singer Song Liar story. Yet if I stayed silent and fled, they would begin their attack plan by morning and I would be buried

alive sooner or later. If I wanted to alter the flow of events and change the future, I had stop them here.

So…

“Shinobu?”

The Zashiki Warashi sounded doubtful, but I ignored her and began to move.

I slowly raised my hands and walked boldly out in front of them.

Naturally, the atmosphere changed entirely. I first sensed surprise and soon thick tension filled the darkness of the night. Several bright flashlights turned toward my face and I felt pain stabbing deep into my head.

“Who’s that!? …!!”

The figure who asked who I was gasped as soon as he saw my face.

Even if we had met in the Singer Song Liar story, we didn’t actually know each other. Still, he seemed to know me, most likely as the target they planned to attack.

“I want to speak with you! I’m sure this would be of interest to you!!”

Several sets of footsteps ran up and I was quickly partially surrounded by a semicircle. The situation was underway, so there was no backing out now. The thick steel machinery they held was enough to tell me that.

“You’re after the USB memory stick for the Usuhiki Warashi you hid on my suitcase, right? And you need it to restrain your out-of-control Package! Then there’s no need to take a hostage. We should work together!!”

“Where did you learn that?” asked a young man’s voice as a strong grip reached my shoulders. “Where did you learn that!? ‘That’ should still be a secret!!”

“What should still be a secret? That you’re opposed to the casino policy? That you want to blow away the stock transactions of the rich people gathering fortunes here? That you’ll do that by connecting an Usuhiki Warashi to the financial network, causing connection issues in the semiconductors, and accurately destroying only the clusters containing that transaction data!?”

The man seemed taken aback when I yelled from some close.

“You’re the only ones who think any of that’s a secret. Several groups are already on the move. The CIA is trying to steal the Usuhiki Warashi for their own purposes and Hyakki Yakou is trying to obliterate it all to resolve the problem. All of you will be slaughtered by midday tomorrow at the latest. I don’t know what exactly will happen, but I do know the future you’re imagining isn’t going to happen! Not as things are, anyway!!”

Realistically, this conversation may have been meaningless.

Other options had been available to me.

I could have checked on the location and hurried down the mountain. Then I could have found a way to meet up with the Hyakki Yakou leader’s bodyguards or

contacted Hishigami Mai. If I did that, those expert killers would have quickly annihilated them for me. At the very least, the odds of success would have been far greater than for an amateur high school boy.

But…

But…!!

“There’s still time.”

Did we really have to fight?

My right temple seemed to writhe eerily. It was true we had been enemies in that Singer Song Liar story. There was no way we could have gotten along there. I knew that.

But that was only because their attack plan had succeeded. In that world, they had buried me alive in that dark cave, they had taken the Zashiki Warashi hostage, and everything had been far too late.

But what about now?

What about before all that?

“You planned revenge. You decided to take everything from the rich people who forced these difficulties on you, so you acquired the Usuhiki Warashi Package! But… but!! That’s all you did. You still haven’t actually taken anything from anyone!!”

Nothing was settled “yet”.

No one had committed a crime “yet”.

Therefore, there was no need for us to fight to the death as if manipulated by a nightmare.

Therefore, we could take a different path.

Therefore, we could work together.

“You can still turn back.”

I swore I would change the future.

That future was not set in stone just yet. It wasn’t certain. Could I really abandon them just because they had died in that “original” version of the future? Straying from one’s path required an appropriately strong will. After acquiring that Package as their ultimate weapon, they had noticed its problems and decided to halt their plan and prioritize safety. Some might accuse them of being cowards, but there was a reason they had been able to stop for fear of sacrificing unrelated people and there was a reason they had been able to force themselves to a stop without moving onward. That reason was human strength. And there was no way I could abandon someone with that powerful will as if they were sacrificial pawns or mere symbols.

If I did that, I would be the one stuck looking at the sickening ending with dark despair in my eyes!

“You can still turn this around! And I’ll give you as much help as you need!! I don’t want to be buried alive and a reality worse than death lies waiting beyond that. And since you’re so afraid of the Usuhiki Warashi Package going out of control, you probably know better than me what that entails!”

“…”

“What will you do?” I asked them with my hands in the air. “This is the final crossroads. Will you continue along the planned path and meet annihilation or will you actually take a step out of this dead end situation? The decision is yours, so which will it be!?”

My words were a mixture of reality and a formless conspiracy, so it probably wasn’t really getting through to them.

However, they had to know they were standing at a dead end here.

Otherwise, they wouldn’t think about rigging their workplace with explosives and burying someone alive.

Silence continued for a while.

“…Can we really stop?”

Finally, the young man holding my shoulders spoke quietly.

“Can we still end this without killing anyone?”

“Yes,” I answered. “The CIA and Hyakki Yakou are only your enemy because the Usuhiki Warashi Package is still active. If we destroy it beyond repair, the CIA won’t be able to take it for themselves and Hyakki Yakou will have no reason to kill you. That will settle everything.”

The young man swore.

It felt less like his gentle conscience was rising to the surface and more like his tension had lapsed and he had lost the resolve to kill.

But whatever the reason, they were hesitant to kill me.

They too had to be proper “humans”.

“Now,” I said. “Let’s change the future.”

Part 17 (Uchimaku Hayabusa — Day 10/03 22:45 - 23:05)

I handed admitted hardware cracker Kozakura Sobiki to the uniformed police officers I had called in.

“Ah… Hey, hey!! I’m going to be okay, right? You haven’t forgotten what you said about a summary indictment and a fine of ten thousand yen, have you!?”

The suspect girl seemed relatively energetic even as she was dragged away by a police officer on either side.

Mystery Bunny Enbi then whispered to me.

“(I don’t know what cracking gets you, but couldn’t her punishment get extended a good bit if additional charges get added?)”

“(That’s none of my concern. Still, she looks young enough to fall under juvenile law, so I doubt she’ll be imprisoned for long.)”

Left alone, the two of us looked down at the memo Kozakura Sobiki had given us.

Someone had hired her to rig the undersea cable with a special wiretap that included a bundle of old coins to affect a Youkai-related Package. The payment method had been too complex to be the locals…or so she had claimed, but she herself had apparently tried to use a method she hadn’t wanted to specify which allowed her to keep some evidence.

And that evidence was on the memo.

“It’s hard to tell what it is with just the string of a dozen or so alphanumeric characters.”

“So it went through the financial server on the Yakata-II cruise ship? …Is this true?”

If the ship’s casino had a financial transaction service, then it would indeed have a powerful satellite line connecting them to the card companies. And you would be able to use that to make a secret payment, but…

“This isn’t good. I clearly can’t investigate a luxury cruise ship filled with VIPs.”

“Well, that was probably their intention.”

“Even Chief Superintendent Mishima of the National Police Agency is a guest on that ship and there’s nothing I can do outside of my Tokyo jurisdiction.”

“Even though there are hints of an actual crime here? A Youkai-related wiretap can be used to interfere with a Package someone else has built into the network. I doubt anyone who went to the trouble of preparing that would never actually use it.”

“I’ll do what I can, but still.”

“Now, now. Enough formalities. I know you’ll step out into the party hall when it comes down to it. I’m looking forward to seeing how cool you are☆”

As we argued, my cellphone rang.

I didn’t recognize the number, but when I answered it, I heard Chief Superintendent Mishima’s voice.

“Hi, Uchimaku-kun. I hear you’re hard at work this late at night. I just got word of the suspect you arrested.”

“Ohhh, yes.”

“If you have a moment, can I ask something of you?” He did not hesitate to begin. “There was a bit of trouble on this ship. Based on the situation, it’s looking like

pressure from a number of sources is going to erase all hint that anything happened, though.”

“…”

“Anyway, we’ve determined one individual who fled the Yakata-II: Hasukawa Yumi. And the real surprise? While she doesn’t actually have a diplomatic passport, it seems, under normal circumstances, she would be picked up by a car with a diplomatic license plate. If the uniformed police questioned her, the Public Security Intelligence Agency and the Foreign Affairs Division would rush in and start intimidating everyone. Do you know what kind of person I’m talking about?”

“A spy or intelligence agent? And from an allied nation?”

“Yes. Normally, information on this kind of ‘personnel’ doesn’t get around to us in the police even when they’re helping on the scene. The information gets suppressed along the way. But this time, we got it. There must have been some trouble on a scale that’s preventing the information suppression system from functioning.”

“And what do you want me to do?”

“The Public Security Intelligence Agency and the Foreign Affairs Division won’t do a thing because they don’t want to cause any trouble with America. If nothing is done, other hidden elements will probably deal with this hidden element and nothing we do is likely to change things much, but should a police officer really just ignore this? Either way, not many people can move freely here. That’s why I’m leaving the rest to you. And of course, you’re free to take it easy if you would prefer.”

“I will do the best I can.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Then I’ll send you Hasukawa Yumi’s location. …She must be protected by a pretty secure system under normal circumstances. Otherwise, she would have at least turned off her cellphone.”

He hung up and I saw Bunny Enbi’s face right in front of me, most likely to listen in.

“What will you do, Detective?”

“Shut up and move back. It seems an American spy has vanished from the cruise ship we were suspecting. It’s unclear if she has any connection to the wiretapped undersea cable or the deaths of the freelance writers, but it couldn’t hurt to pursue her.”

Normally, I would have dismissed Bunny Enbi at this point, but she would have followed me regardless and it would affect her safety if she ran across a criminal where I couldn’t see her. In the end, I could only bring her with me, just like she wanted.

“By the way, do you remember what Kozakura-chan said earlier?”

“She said a lot, so tell me what exactly you mean.”

“Why she thought she was being attacked. The reason other than opening the wiretap unit.”

“Oh, you mean what she saw on the ocean bottom?” I asked, a little annoyed. “Do you really think that’s true? If it is, it means this entire area rose pretty quickly thanks to an undersea volcano.”

Part 18 (Jinnai Shinobu — Day 10/03 23:10 - 23:18)

There was no way I could remember more than ten people’s faces and names in such a short time, but it seemed the young man who had grabbed my shoulders was named Emura Ryouichi. My right temple throbbed. I was pretty sure I had met him at the airport in the Singer Song Liar story.

After ensuring everything was safe, I met up with the Zashiki Warashi and the girl leader of Hyakki Yakou.

“I certainly didn’t expect it to end like that,” asked the girl.

“Oh? You didn’t? If you think about it carefully, the attack only happened in the Singer Song Liar story. Fearing that and making a preemptive strike seems like boarding those imaginary rails and letting them determine the future.”

Oh, honestly! Don’t act so calm now that we know the answer, you good-for-nothing! Do you have any idea how many years I worried off of my life getting to this peaceful resolution!?

At any rate, we had defeated the Singer Song Liar story for the first time, so we all began strategizing how to use that in the next step.

“The goldmine had always had a limit,” said Emura. “When talk of inviting in casinos first arrived, we rejoiced at the change to the island’s environment. But it was no use. None of the money that produced ever came back to us. The living infrastructure remained old and worn out and the only school is on the verge of shutting down. In the end, the locals dry up while the entertainment companies get all the money. It was set up like that from the beginning, but we didn’t catch on until afterwards.”

“And so you tried to destroy that cycle of profit?”

“Yes, even though getting rid of the casinos would only leave the dying island. It wouldn’t give us any new life. Still, we were going to collapse if we didn’t have some kind of goal.”

But something must have led them to stop.

Something great enough to make them fear the Usuhiki Warashi Package and try to seal it away.

“It was the deaths of the freelance writers,” said Emura. “They were caused by a malfunctioning automatic brake system, an exploding cellphone battery, and carbon monoxide leaking from a hot water heater. The people investigating Goldmine Island died strange deaths one after another. We initially thought it was a coincidence, but as we investigated the Usuhiki Warashi Package, we realized it could do all that. But I swear to you it wasn’t us. Someone had taken control. And once we realized that, we got scared.”

If they didn’t do anything, something even worse would happen and all of it would be blamed on them, so they had decided to abandon the Package they had acquired.

“What are you going to do now?”

“The heart of all this is the USB hardware key hidden on my suitcase which can stop the Usuhiki Warashi. By taking over the Package, the CIA will use Japan’s exported financial systems to spread fear around the globe and place all responsibility on Japan. That way they can drive down the price of an entire nation. We need to somehow safely retrieve that suitcase.”

The locals and the CIA had likely considered having a double retrieve the suitcase or making an attack on the airport itself. In the end, the risks had probably outweighed the benefits, so they had decided to let me retrieve it.

My right temple itched.

But if we followed the same series of events, a hellish conclusion awaited.

And just as I started wondering what to do, I heard an odd rustling sound.

I looked over toward it.

“Phew… I-I am exhausted.”

A tanuki that looked like a round stuffed animal left a thicket.

“What in the world are you doing?”

“I am here to repay our debt, of course. It was not easy following your scent all the way here.”

Come to think of it, they saved me at the airport during the Singer Song Liar story.

The Zashiki Warashi tilted her head.

“Can this tanuki transform into a human?”

“Why of course.”

After a burst of comical smoke, the round tanuki became a maid with a nice body. It pained me to admit it, but my eyes were drawn to the thighs below her miniskirt.

Hyakki Yakou’s leader clasped her small hands in front of her chest.

“Then can you transform into Jinnai Shinobu to fool the CIA?”

“She did that in the Singer Song Liar story. Even if we get the fox and badger’s help too, we won’t be able to change the flow of events.”

The kimono-wearing girl gave a start.

She reached into her sleeve and pulled out an extremely simple cellphone. She held it in one hand, poked at the buttons with her other index finger, and wrapped both hands around it to answer it.

“Yes, yes. …Yes?”

For some reason, she held the phone out to me.

“It’s for you, apparently.”

“Who is it?”

“Hishigami Mai.”

Pointless tension ran down my back.

It felt like death’s fingertips were stroking my spine.

I stared down at the phone for a while, but I finally held it to my ear since I had no choice but to answer.

“Hi, Jinnai Shinobu-chan. How does it feel for the grim reaper to know your name?”

“Oh, dear. This is no laughing matter.”

“By the way, the grim reaper in this case isn’t me. Where are you right now?”

“Where?”

For some reason, I hesitated to answer.

“The mountain. It’s a ten to fifteen minute walk from the casino city. There’s a hand-dug tunnel entrance and about three cabins nearby.”

“That’s enough. Don’t you die until I get there.”

I thought I was going to pass out.

When she said it, words like “die” or “kill” had an entirely different meaning than from the dimwitted delinquents that liked to use them so frequently. They held their pure, original, and thoroughly honed meanings.

“What? What are you saying is going to happen to me!?”

“I don’t have time to explain. It will probably take me ten minutes to arrive if I go all out, so working to survive that long is the bare minimum required of you. Don’t even think about defeating this CIA agent. Just think of ways to buy time. And be especially cautious of miniskirt maids with short brown hair.”

“…”

I froze in place when I heard that.

I felt like an invisible thread was wrapped tightly around my heart.

Miniskirt. Maid. Short hair. Brown hair. As I thought of those four criteria, I slowly and hesitantly turned my head as if photographing the stars.

The wet nurse tanuki was there.

She was smiling with the others in our group, but what was her current form?

I took a slow step backwards.

That's…that's right. How did she so conveniently find this spot just now? Did she really follow my scent? And if not, who was the skilled person who would have gone on a rampage in the airport in the original flow of events?

As I wondered that, my intense unease managed to distract me for just an instant.

And in that instant, *I was suddenly hit on the side of the head so hard I thought it had to be a hammer or something.*

"Gah…bah…!?"

I was knocked to the ground and someone had climbed on top of me. She had short brown hair and a maid uniform with a short skirt, but the face I could see in the darkness looked completely different from the wet nurse tanuki.

What is going on?

If Hishigami Mai hadn't called, I wouldn't have been distracted. No, if I hadn't had the advance information from the Singer Song Liar story…

It's like the rails we finally started to get switched over are being forced back to the Singer Song Liar story!

"Damn…it…!!"

"Once I have you, it will all be settled."

The others quickly caught on, but before they could do anything, the miniskirt maid had pulled a small handgun from her thigh.

"If I overclock the Amanojaku, all of the appearing options will be flattened down. The protruding nails will all be hammered down and the future will be corrected back to the plan. If today ends and tomorrow begins, the rails will return to normal and we can reach the blue light."

I heard a series of gunshots that seemed far too rapid for a handgun.

She was driving away the others with a storm of lead before they could approach and surround us.

"Kyah!!"

The wet nurse tanuki shielded the miners who had yet to move and she was blown backwards. While a Youkai was immune to physical attacks, she could not cover for them forever. And this miniskirt maid would not shy away from bloodshed.

She was overclocking the Amanojaku directly linked to the Singer Song Liar story.

That would flatten down the appearing options. It would hammer down the protruding nails.

It would correct the future back to the plan.

Even if I did not understand what each individual part meant, it was enough to get my right temple itching. She was going to crush whatever it was we had finally started to change and she would bring it all back to its original path. She wanted to

bring about that conclusion that made me want to vomit when I so much as thought about it.

The maid sitting on top of me aimed her handgun at the Zashiki Warashi and Hyakki Yakou's leader.

I won't let you do that.

I won't let you just do whatever you want any longer!!

"Goddamn youuuuuuuuuuu!!"

"?"

I gathered all my strength and moved my body with her still sitting on top of me. I didn't so much push her off as I crawled like a caterpillar with her still on top of me.

But that was enough.

We were on a mountain slope near the tunnel entrance. Other than the artificially maintained parts, the ground was steeply sloped, so I only needed to get us started. From there, we would follow gravity and roll down on our own.

I felt something sliding and a prop being removed.

I heard dry gunshots, but the Hyakki Yakou girl was not bloodied.

The ballistic paths had been thrown far off course.

The maid and I fell quickly down the mountain slope.

Part 19 (Jinnai Shinobu — Day 10/03 23:18 - 23:28)

I rolled.

I rolled and rolled. I rolled into the forest and my back slammed into a thick tree trunk. The shock was enough that I thought I was going to cough up blood, but it was also enough to finally stop me.

The miniskirt maid had already separated from me, but not because I had thrown her off. She was only a few meters away. Too far for me to reach her, but close enough to kill me with her gun. She had avoided the collision by pressing her hands and feet against the slope like a wild animal.

Her eyes glowed eerily in the moonlight and they were accurately trained on me.

"What will you do now?"

She asked in human language.

Someone with a human form spoke in human language. That was a perfectly normal phenomenon, yet it seemed horribly wrong somehow. I simply could not place this enemy in the same category as myself. That was how powerful the invisible "something" surrounding her was.

“Will you oppose me, or won’t you? Will you persuade me, or won’t you? Will you collapse into tears, or won’t you? Any of them is fine and all of them are fine, but the outcome will not change. The outcome has been set from the beginning.”

“What are you trying to do?” I groaned while having trouble breathing.

Human speed could not hope to win against a bullet. I knew that, but I still tried to think. I needed to buy time and make sure I could move my body.

“You’re going to spread fear around the globe, force all responsibility on this country, and drive down the price of Japan. …It’s simple enough to say, but how many people do you think are going to have their lives turned upside down by that? It won’t just be the Japanese hanging themselves. A lot of people trust in the Japanese yen. If it collapses that badly, investors the world over will have no choice but to hang themselves. From the shadiest investment fund to some newlywed wife investing her spare change, you can’t know how far the damage will spread!!”

“That is simple.” That monster in a woman’s body accurately aimed the gun at me and answered in undeniably human words. “This is all for you and your country. We must snuff out the blue light.”

“What…are you…talking about?”

“You do not have to understand. It is because you are so immature that someone else must protect your country from the blue light.”

I did not understand a word of it.

Language was a tool meant to convey people’s thoughts and it had no meaning if it was an empty container. That philosophical thought felt disturbingly real to me here. It felt as threatening as being handed a blank sheet of paper and being told to decipher it. I couldn’t help but be overcome by confusion.

“How can I accept that?”

“You are free to accept it or not, but the outcome will not change.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

“?”

“A certain woman told me to survive for ten minutes. She said that was the bare minimum required of me. She said not to think about defeating you and to think of ways to buy time.”

So…

“All I have to do is wait. I just have to drag out this conversation by any means necessary!!”

I don’t think she had time to turn around.

A moment later, the woman in question, Hishigami Mai, rushed in as a gust of black wind.

Part 20 (Hishigami Mai — Day 10/03 23:28 - 23:45)

The forest was quiet and the mountain was sleeping.

A clawless and fangless human that had given up its fur was an outsider there. It was said a soldier with their senses honed to the extreme could detect the scent of shampoo from four hundred meters away. If they knew the general direction, they could turn all five senses toward their surroundings and find the person hidden there.

At any rate, I was lucky to get the first attack in.

Does it hurt to have a knee digging into your cheek? Then how about I push you down and finish you off!?

“Tch!!”

Dry gunshots rang out, but I moved just my upper body around to avoid the bullets while still sitting on the maid’s stomach.

Or that’s what should have happened.

“?”

Something warm trailed down my cheek.

Once I realized it came from the scrape of a bullet grazing my temple, I quickly made a change of plans.

I forcefully jumped back to put some distance between us and the maid fired more bullets.

This time, I was sure I had dodged them.

I kept my body entirely away from the straight line running from the muzzle of the handgun.

Yet in reality, the bullets opened dark red holes in my right shoulder and side.

“What…is going on!?”

“That is not what you should be surprised about. The true surprise is that you still haven’t been fatally wounded.”

She threw aside the old magazine and replaced it with a longer one that was twice the length of the gun itself. She then pulled the slide to load the first bullet.

“I am using the same resources. I could not prepare a new Youkai. Just think back to Sid Clouds’s method.”

“He was boosting his muscular strength with the Ubume’s baby. Did that leave the Ubume itself available!?”

I had lost a fair bit of blood, but my bones and organs were untouched. I relied on my speed and rushed back in toward the maid to swiftly get in a fatal blow.

But…

“!?”

Once I was in range for a certain kill, the maid’s body vanished like fog or an illusion and I heard dry gunshots from the side. I was far too slow to react to the sound, so one arm was destroyed and the bullets stopped just before reaching my organs.

This woman!!

“The Ubume appears on a road at night and she prefers intersections of multiple paths, be it at a crossroads or a bridge. That is of course because the common point between a number of paths raises the odds of more victims encountering her.”

By the time I heard the voice, the maid was already gone.

“I have made a broad interpretation of that trait. In other words, I can freely control the probability of an ‘encounter’. I connect to the surrounding space, bind all of the paths together, and divide that which will meet from that which will not meet. Just like the Ubume meets her victim and separates that victim form any witnesses to ensure their death.”

It sounded like we were in an echoing cave. The source of her voice was dispersed to the point I couldn’t pinpoint a direction.

“You will not meet me.”

Only the dripping of my blood on the ground was clear.

Not good! Really not good! As long as I’m caught in her technique, I’ll be killed in a completely one-sided game!!

“But my devilish attacks will always meet you.”

The voice was directed straight toward me, just like the sights of the gun.

“After all, bullets follow a ballistic path, so I can freely bind them to you.”

Gunshots rang out.

The multiple lead bullets flew like lightning and accurately pierced my body.

Part 21 (Uchimaku Hayabusa — Day 10/03 23:45 - 23:50)

The continuous gunshots stabbed into our ears.

Hiking up a mountain in a cheap, impractical suit and leather shoes was not fun, but that discomfort was immediately swept from my mind by the sense of danger that spread from the center of my head to the farthest reaches of my body.

“This isn’t good. That wasn’t just a hunting rifle. It was lighter and rapid fire.”

“Probably a machine pistol or a submachinegun. Either way, it’s firing handgun rounds. But it sounds like there’s only one source, so I don’t think they’re fighting a war at the port or anything.”

Why are you grinning? This isn't just some news on TV. We can get dragged into the center of it at any time.

I really shouldn't have brought her along.

I don't have a gun with me and a bow gun was enough to give me trouble.

"Mystery Freak, you stay here. If you hear gunfire again, run straight away no matter what's happened."

"Um, are you serious, detective?"

"We can't just sit in safety, observing the suspects and hunting down the criminal anymore! This is beyond what you can handle and I can't guarantee I can protect a civilian minor here!"

"Not what I meant."

Bunny Enbi placed her index finger on my lips to silence me.

"According to that NPA guy, the enemy here is the CIA. I don't know if she's an official agent or a local helper, but a criminal protected by state secrets has shown herself. You may have taken one step outside of the formal police agencies, but do you really think that's enough here? You can't take move your other foot out, so it would be best to have someone with you to step in the puddles and pick up the items."

"I wasn't taking you with me to turn you into a criminal."

"Thank you for looking out for me. If you had added 'I love you' at the end, I might have forced myself onto you right here."

But Enbi quickly changed her tone.

"This doesn't look like the time to be carefully choosing your cards. Can't you feel this tense atmosphere, detective?"

"?"

"This isn't like the Funa Yuurei on Zashou Island or the Aoandon in Zenmetsu Village. It isn't that we've gotten ourselves involved in my sister's territory. This is a surprise, because I didn't know there was a world beyond even that."

Part 22 (Jinnai Shinobu — Day 10/03 23:45 - 23:58)

I could only watch.

Hishigami Mai's body tilted. She had taken several bullets to the back and she was limply collapsing to the ground. Only after seeing that definite loss of life did I realize she too was a human just like the rest of us.

She could fail and she could make mistakes.

No matter how much she showed off and how full of herself she was, there was no guarantee she could keep her promises.

“It’s over now,” said the miniskirt maid, far too easily. “Didn’t I tell you? Whether you do anything or not is your decision, but it will not change the outcome.”

“……”

It was no use.

How was I supposed to fight this?

I wouldn’t have stood a chance against someone with a normal gun, yet this woman was using a Youkai power and had overwhelmingly defeated even Hishigami Mai. What could a normal high school boy do against a true monster like that?

“Once I have you, I can overclock the Amanojaku.”

She slowly but surely walked toward me.

“That will correct the twisted path and return everything to normal. We will be able to reach the blue light for your sake and for your country’s sake.”

Was it all over?

I could not stop the CIA. They would misuse the Usuhiki Warashi Package, spread fear around the globe concerning the exported Japanese financial systems, place all of the blame on Japan, and buy Japan at a vastly reduced price while claiming to be assisting its recovery. Was this leading to that future?

I just about gave up, but then some oddly muffled gunshots were directed toward the maid’s back.

“…?”

“*You showed your back, didn’t you?*”

I heard a voice.

It came from Hishigami Mai who was collapsed on the slope. At some point, a small handgun with a suppressor attached had appeared in her hand.

“You can connect all ‘paths’ and manipulate their encounter rate, but for some strange reason, you never showed your back. Yet if you could simply determine my attacks wouldn’t hit, that shouldn’t have mattered.”

The maid slowly turned around.

It didn’t seem Mai could get up, but she showed no sign of caring.

“That means your back is the exception. Wasn’t that your Achilles’ heel? The Ubume is said to be a collection of the women who died in childbirth and their persistent desire to at least protect their child. An Ubume cannot exist as just an Ubume. There must always be a symbol of the child. They ask a passerby to hold their baby and kill them by the baby’s ever-increasing weight, but it’s said they leave and stop trying to kill the victim if they sense any danger to the baby.”

“You…mean…?” I muttered without thinking.

Mai responded with a smile on her bloody lips.

“The Ubume appears holding her baby, but since your back is your weakness, *are you carrying it on your back*? It might be a paper doll shaped like a child and it may just be stored inside your maid outfit to make it look like you’re carrying it, but it would be deadly for you if it were damaged. The Ubume will always keep her baby safe even if it means abandoning her fearsome power, so you’ve lost your special ability. You can no longer connect paths and manipulate the encounter rate!!”

More muffled gunshots continued and the miniskirt maid could only let them hit her.

But…

I clearly saw the woman smile.

“No,” I muttered as I spoke what I could instinctually sense. “She wasn’t relying on the Ubume. She’s been fixated on another Youkai from the beginning! So…!!”

“Yes, I was using – and truly wanted to use – the Amanojaku.”

The maid slowly aimed her handgun at Hishigami Mai.

The bullets had definitely hit her, yet there wasn’t a single red stain on her miniskirt maid outfit.

“*That Youkai can replace everything with lies. That is why I deceived you so easily.*”

It happened far too quickly.

As several bullets struck her, Hishigami Mai transformed. The face that symbolized her transformed. It splattered apart like a jigsaw puzzle thrown to the floor.

There was nothing I could do.

The situation had suddenly gone two steps too far for me to even feel fear or sadness.

I forgot even to scream and simply spoke in a daze.

“You mean you only made it look like you were using the Ubume in your tactics? And all so you could misuse the Amanojaku’s lying trait?”

“Yes. It was really just an elementary illusion. I was a little let down when it looked like I was going to win without having to use this, so I’m glad I was able to use everything I had stocked up.”

All was lost now.

Every single chance of victory had slipped from my fingers.

“Whether you do anything or not is your decision. Who will you rely on now? That Zashiki Warashi and the local miners? Or maybe the detective who is only now carelessly entering the forest with a girl? They will arrive here eventually regardless, but all of them will die once they do. That is how this is set up.”

It felt like she was reading from a book of prophecy.

And an extremely cruel one that went on and on about all sorts of destruction yet never mentioned a way to stop it.

Anyone who met her would die.

And at this rate, it was only a matter of time before a whole lot of people approached this monster.

“So choose for yourself. *At what stage do you want this to end?* At Hishigami Mai’s death, at the annihilation of the Zashiki Warashi and the others with her, or at the detective’s discovery of all the corpses? You have options, but you cannot undo your previous choices. So choose for yourself when you will step down.”

“…”

My mind went entirely blank.

After all, there was nothing I could do. What could I possibly do? It was obvious that struggling and resisting any longer would only increase the number of deaths. It was plain as day. So what was I supposed to do? My right temple itched. Was my best option to follow the Singer Song Liar story while ensuring everyone survived so I could at least regain the country decades later? Was that really the best option? Could I really accept that?

“You are free to choose whatever you want,” said the maid. “But there is only one result. No one can escape the Amanojaku. You understand that, don’t you?”

She seemed to be tempting me, soothing me.

She made that bold and triumphant announcement while completely looking down on me.

But…

No one can escape the Amanojaku?

“Wait.”

What are we dealing with here?

“Both my Singer Song Liar story and this miniskirt maid’s power come from the Amanojaku. That’s a single Youkai. This isn’t about the Usuhiki Warashi, Kechibi, or Ubume anymore. If everything is ruled by the Amanojaku alone, I can turn this all on its head by finding a way to defeat that Amanojaku. I can still turn this around!!

Think.

You have to think.

What is the Singer Song Liar story anyway? Sticking a Youkai in a fantasy is too simple and vague. If it was built into a Package, there has to be some kind of concrete, physical system. The Amanojaku is a contrarian Youkai that answers any question with a lie. It commits small pranks like reading traveler’s minds to mimic them and surprise them, but it’s also known to commit great crimes like killing a princess, wearing her skin, and taking her place. To include an Amanojaku, there must be a huge symbol of a lies. It has to be a concrete, physical, secure, and sturdy

symbol of lies and not something easily shaken or erased like an automatically-generated story.

Think back to the Singer Song Liar story and what happened in reality.

Think back to everything presented there, seen there, and heard there.

Goldmine Island. A small island off of Kyushu. The temperature is twenty eight degrees. It's a mining island originally known as Heavy Cruiser Island. It's now the stage for a new casino policy, but the profits aren't evenly returned, creating friction between the locals and the entertainment companies. The locals claim the companies are mining deep below the island with work ships and that's why there's no more gold in the mines. The locals thoroughly hate the casinos. The pineapple-like tropical trees have some red and yellow from the few maple and gingko trees still mixed in.

"……
……Oh, I get it."

"?"

I had finally found it.

I had found the symbol of lies and the system prepared to store the Amanojaku.

And of course, the entire Package would cease to function if that was destroyed. It would all disperse and her plan would fail.

In that case, I had no reason to hesitate.

I would reveal the lie.

I would defeat the Amanojaku using the truth.

I would turn everything on its head.

I would end it all in just a few words.

And so I spoke those few words to the woman of lies who ruled everything here.

"*This island isn't in its original location. It was artificially moved from its original coordinates.*"

I clearly heard the sound of cracks running through glass.

"You slowly moved Goldmine Island far from its original location, but moving it wasn't your goal. You wanted an environment where everyone was unknowingly being deceived. It was all for your symbol of lies, the Amanojaku!!"

"What…are you talking about?"

"You tricked everyone here!! You threw us all inside a giant lie! That allowed the Amanojaku to use its full power and that made my story so tremendously effective!! That's all it was!!"

"Ridiculous. Do you really think we could do that? Even if it's a small island, how much mass do you think that is?"

“The amount of mass doesn’t matter. As long as you can achieve buoyancy, any object will float. There’s been talk of strange work ships stopping at the island since the casinos were first invited in. They would secretly carry out huge amounts of dirt and sand, so people thought they were digging up gold without permission.”

The locals hadn’t been wrong, but they had only been looking at it from their interests.

“But they were doing something else. They were creating a spider web of tunnels deep below the island and filling them with a foaming substance like polyurethane. If they separated the island from its roots with a bunch of explosives, Goldmine Island would float up like a life preserver!”

To put it more liberally, it was like floating the entire island on a giant kickboard.

As the casinos arrived, the beaches had apparently rapidly shrunk. Everyone had accepted it as sea level rise due to global warming, but that probably wasn’t it.

After spending more than a year slowly moving the island a few kilometers, it had been sunk down and affixed to a “new base” prepared on the ocean bottom. And they had done that by removing the foaming material.

But it had rocked in the waves while being moved. And when it was affixed to the new base, a height difference of a few centimeters to a few dozen centimeters could have been introduced. That would have made it look like the ocean level had risen and the beaches had shrunk.

The miniskirt maid tensed her lips.

“Nothing that ridiculous could have happened. What about the airplane pilots? Or the ship captains? How could we have fooled them? How could we guide them to Goldmine Island’s supposed new location!?”

“These days, no captain navigates with a sea chart and compass in one hand. They’re entirely reliant on the electronic control and digital display, so you just have to fake those numbers. If the island was moved bit by bit in a circle around a central point without changing the actual distance, the pilots just looking at the numbers won’t know that the numbers have been swapped out and that they’re being guided in a different direction!!”

Someone who *determined directions by looking at the moon or stars* may have noticed something was off, but no one captained a ship or piloted an airplane with those primitive methods anymore.

And while it would be a lot of trouble to swap out those numbers, that made sense too.

The Amanojaku was a Youkai of lies and it would answer any question with a lie. When the ships and airplanes sent out their “questions”, the navigation equipment would “answer” with false data, guiding them to the island of lies.

That setup had to have been quite comfortable for the Amanojaku.

“GPS systems are reliant on America, so you in the CIA can easily make changes to all the map apps and car navigation systems that use it. The same goes for airport control and ship navigation systems. Even if the equipment itself is made in Japan,

the software inside is all made in America. It wouldn't be difficult for you to swap out the numbers for this island that everyone was looking at."

If someone had dived down to the ocean bottom, *the terrain around the island may have looked completely wrong.*

That would have turned Goldmine Island's surroundings into a demonic area of sea. After all, the actual coordinates and the data were completely different. If one was using older means of determining direction or a navigation system that didn't rely on America, it was possible two ships could head to the same coordinates and never find each other even as they spoke over the radio or phone. That was to be expected when their ideas of the "same coordinates" were so different.

"But you failed. I saw through it. I used the truth to break through your world of lies! This is no longer a world running on lies. By bringing in the truth, the conditions you need to keep the Amanojaku will have crumbled. That power won't last much longer!!"

"Don't… Don't be ridiculous. We were not doing anything like that. Your method of refuting us was wrong. Your incorrect deductions won't do anything to the Amanojaku's power."

"Really?"

Then why are you cutting in like this?

Are you panicking?

"Yes, really!! No one on Goldmine Island has noticed anything off. And even you have no proof of any of this, do you? Do you really think you can force this onto someone else when you can't even convince yourself!?"

It did indeed hurt to have her point that out.

I wasn't a forensics expert and I didn't have time to call one in. If this miniskirt maid silenced me, she would probably be able to reach the Amanojaku almost immediately and that would determine the future. This country would fall into ruin.

That meant I had to do something with what I had here.

I had to prove this was an island of lies using what I had at my disposal.

"We're currently farther north than Goldmine Island's original location, aren't we? Whether it's five or ten kilometers, it has to be enough to make the island's mere presence here a lie."

"What are you saying?"

"My cellphone says the temperature is twenty eight degrees. Just like a tropical island, the temperature has fluctuated between twenty five and thirty degrees over the past week. This is a warm enough night to forget it's October."

"What's your point?"

"That doesn't make sense."

I pointed, but not at the miniskirt maid.

I pointed at the tree behind her.

"*The maple trees are turning red.* But if this midsummer heat was constant, they never would have started changing color!! It's possible to place dry ice at the base of a tree to make its leaves change color early, but I can't think of a single logical reason to do that on a tropical island like this. That means the maple trees are changing naturally!!"

"…"

"But why!? Why is there a difference between the temperature on the screen here and the color change in the leaves? That's because Goldmine Island is supposed to be south of here where it's warmer and the trees haven't started changing color yet! When falsifying the data to fool the locals, you had to swap out the meteorological data like temperature and humidity, didn't you!? And that's why the leaves have started changing color several days early!!"

From the very beginning, I had thought this island was "chilly".

When I had checked my cellphone and seen the lie that it was twenty eight degrees, I had just assumed it was due to the low humidity and the night wind.

"There's a huge difference between the actual color of the leaves and the temperature shown on the screen here!! This proves that the island was moved from its original location and that we've been thrown into a giant lie!!!!!"

Multiple gunshots rang out and dark red holes opened from my chest to my navel as if I had fallen victim to a giant sewing machine.

She may have tried to silence me before I made the decisive statement. She may have decided she could include "Jinnai Shinobu" in the system as long as my brain or heart remained.

My body tilted to the side and a rusty flavor rushed up into my throat.

There was probably no saving me.

But make no mistake.

All I needed was the strength to move my trembling lips.

Her power was a collection of lies. No matter what she accomplished, it was nothing but a house built on sand.

If the lies were revealed, it would all disappear.

I just had to use the truth to break the many tragedies she had created.

"*It was all…lies. This is the truth!!*"

With that, I heard shattering glass and our surroundings entirely changed.

They were overwritten.

The many holes in my gut vanished. The corpse with the smashed face returned to Hishigami Mai's lovely form.

It had all begun with a lie, so no matter what was piled on top of it, it would all come tumbling down once the foundational lie vanished. It was just like a tree trunk and branches. No matter how long the branches were, if you took an axe to the trunk, the entire tree would fall.

That was what had happened here.

"Ah…ah…"

The miniskirt maid glanced around.

She seemed to be thinking about how to recover from here, so I spoke.

"Checkmate."

"Don't act so full of yourself! You're just an amateur!! Just because I can't control the Amanojaku doesn't mean that you can defeat me here. I can vanish for the moment, rebuild my foundation, and return it all to normal!!"

"Yes, you can escape right now, but without the Amanojaku Package, we won't do what you say. You can't take over the Usuhiki Warashi and you can't buy Japan. So is there still any reason to fight?"

"!!"

"So that means you have a choice. *At what stage do you want this to end?*"

I repeated the same question she had asked me earlier.

"Defeating me and continuing on would be easy. I'm just a normal high school boy. But a more powerful enemy will show up next. Will it be my detective of an uncle? Or if he isn't enough, will it be the skilled agent that even Hyakki Yakou fears? How far can you get now that you've lost your power?"

"……!!!!!!"

"So let me say this."

I gave my final notification to the woman whose throat had to have gone dry.

"Jinnai Shinobu, Uchimaku Hayabusa, or Hishigami Mai? Which one do you want to settle this with you!?"

PACKAGE_Console_System_Ver.010.56

.

Operation_Name=“Singer_Song_Liar”.

Target_Core=“AMA-NO-JAKU”

“Effective_Area=“Goldmine_Island//Japan//The_World”.

Master_User=“YUMI=HASUKAWA”.

Slave_User=“Shinobu=JIN-NAI” “and_all_users”.

Attestration_Code_01=“**********”.

Attestration_Code_02=“**********”.

Attestration_Code_03=“**********”.

Sure.Acess_Start.

Control_Mode=“Manual” “Emergency”.

Sure.All_Command_Prompt_Open(Include_Secret_Commands).

Connect=“Out” “All_Users”.

Sure.Command_Execution_Start.

Notice//
All_Signals_Lost,And_All_Effects_Lost.Countdown_Start_For_All_Processes,10,09,08
…

Self-contradiction has exceeded acceptable limits. As an emergency measure to avoid backflow of unanticipated damages based on the rapid causal changes, the Package will now end all processes.

Ending the processes includes the self-destruction of system elements, so restarting the processes or extracting data from the damaged portions will not be possible. To restart the processes, it is strongly recommended one fully reconstruct both the hardware and software elements of the Package’s system.

Work complete.

This message window will disappear in ten seconds.

Epilogue

The day known as “today” ended and the new day known as “tomorrow” began.

Even that simple fact filled me with emotion.

My uncle, the Mystery Freak named Hishigami Enbi, her sister Hishigami Mai, and the Sunekosuri had all gathered with the rest of us. We were a bit up the slope in the clearing near the tunnel entrance.

Incidentally, the entire situation was quickly settled as soon as the effects of the Amanojaku wore off. Hyakki Yakou’s girl leader and her bodyguards had suddenly rushed in toward the villain as if they had suddenly remembered something.

The miniskirt maid herself, whose name was apparently Hasukawa Yumi, was kneeling down with everyone surrounding her.

Hishigami Enbi, who was hiking through the mountain in a bunny suit for some reason, frowned and spoke.

“Eh? She was behind it all? So does that mean the CIA was the one killing freelance writers with malfunctioning electronics!?”

“Probably. They were the ones who interfered with the Usuhiki Warashi Package and they would have been the ones who would want to hide the island’s movement since they were the ones desperate to control the Amanojaku.”

For some reason, my annoyed answer led the middle school bunny girl to pout her lips and start complaining. She seemed to be the type who didn’t like to have a CIA agent, an exorcist family, or a god on the dramatis personae.

But that was her problem.

I had to do what was left for me to do.

“Hey,” I said to Hishigami Mai. “Do you have a random blade? A knife will work.”

“I do.”

She pulled a disturbingly long and skinny blade from the side of her boot and held the handle out to me. The single-edged blade was over twenty centimeters long and it looked like a sashimi knife customized for killing.

“But what are you going to use it for? Do you feel like finishing off the villain yourself?”

“No, that isn’t it. There’s still one mystery remaining.”

“?”

“The Amanojaku. That Youkai is the cause of all this, but where is it?”

I held the knife tight as I spat out the words.

“It’s supposed to correct reality based on the Singer Song Liar story, but that isn’t enough for everything to go according to the CIA’s plan. They were simply using my story to their own ends, so the story itself isn’t enough. They would first need to make me create the song they wanted so the story they wanted would be made.”

One only had to recall the traits of the Amanojaku.

It was a symbol of lies that answered any question with a lie.

It would read people’s minds and mimic them to surprise them.

It would pull simple pranks, yet it was also a deadly Youkai that would kill people, wear their skin, and take their place.

And most importantly, when Hasukawa Yumi wanted to make a correction to their plan, she had tried to capture me. Why would she need me to interfere with the world of lies constructed by the Amanojaku?

“They used its trait to read someone’s mind and mimic them to create an input and output point for reading and writing the contents of my mind. It’s obvious where something like that would be hidden. Especially for a Youkai that can wear people’s skin to disguise themselves.”

Yes.

There had been a certain sign every time I had recalled the Singer Song Liar story.

My right temple.

There had been some itching movement there.

So!

I brought the narrow and sharp blade of the sashimi-style knife to the side of my head.

I heard a brief shriek in an unfamiliar voice, but I ignored it and moved the blade further.

I had no idea when “this” had started hiding in my head. As soon as I had finished writing the song and story with Singer Song Liar? When I had arrived on the island? In the airplane? Or around the time the USB hardware key was attached to my suitcase before takeoff? But that wouldn’t matter as long I could remove it.

I couldn’t return to the normal world with “this” still in there. I was afraid to do this, but I had no way of knowing what effect leaving it would have.

I heard an unpleasant splintering sound as the strange wriggling sensation underneath my skin grew and expanded. This was not blood gathering. I could feel something far more out of place pushing out there.

But…

“What? Isn’t this…a little too big!?”

I shuddered as I traced my fingers over its outline. I had assumed it would be at most the size of my little fingernail, but it was far larger. It was like a balloon being inflated to the limit. In no time at all, it had grown larger than my skull. I had known Youkai didn’t obey the laws of physics, but wasn’t this a little much? What had happened inside my head with this shoved inside!?

With the sound of gas bubbling up from a swamp, “it” completely separated.

It was the Amanojaku.

It was less than a meter tall, so about the size of a fair-sized child. It was small for a person, but I was pretty sure it was a world record for a tumor. Two horns seemed to split through the disheveled hair. Its sex was difficult to judge through the thin kimono, but as a symbol of lies, it may not have had a definite sex.

It said nothing.

It only gave a creepy laugh and gave my face an upturned glance.

Oh, I get it. This is about what I would expect for a contrarian Youkai that always answers with a lie.

It was truly the source of everything that had happened.

However, it had only been used by the CIA and it had meant no harm itself.

I staggered and waved my bloody hand as if shooing it away.

“Go disappear somewhere. We have no need for you.”

“I won’t thank you, human.”

It looked like a kid, but its response was full of impudence. And with that, it ran into the dark forest without looking back.

They’re supposed to always answer with lies, so does that mean it’s actually thankful?

I wondered that as I returned the human carving knife to Hishigami Mai.

That was when a great din reached us as a large transport helicopter approached and landed. I assumed it was from Hyakki Yakou, but it wasn’t. It belonged to the same country that had manufactured it: America.

Hasukawa Yumi winked at me with her hands still clasped behind her head.

“I lost this time. Not killing me is sure to benefit you in the future.”

“Don’t forget that I let you go. Don’t try anything on us again.”

“We won’t. That alone I can promise you.”

She slowly stood without removing her hands from the back of her head.

She was demonstrating her confidence.

She smiled at me with men in military uniforms standing on either side of her.

“I will be leaving this country for the time being. I feel bad for leaving behind those on our military bases, but if I stay here any longer, I will undoubtedly get dragged into the blue light issue. And it will be too late to escape once that happens.”

“Wait a second. What are you talking about? The blue light?”

“Didn’t I explain that this was all for your sake and for your country’s sake?”

The helicopter rotor nearly drowned out her voice.

That was how hopelessly transparent that angelic voice was.

“The CIA failed. The higher ups are not going to be happy about this. It looked like the NSA and FRB were only thinking of stopping any influence that reached our shores, so you just lost your final chance. …Things can only come tumbling down now. I tried to stop the blue light, but your country didn’t want that.”

“Again, what are you talking about!? What is this blue light!?”

“It was to be your country’s fate to sink without ever knowing that, but I do owe you. Just this once, I’ll give you some information.”

As she left, Hasukawa Yumi held out a memory card smaller than a stamp.

The soldiers around her did not stop her.

They then boarded the large helicopter and flew off into the night sky. It was like they were trying to escape the mountain before it was engulfed in a forest fire.

“What?”

I was overcome by a strange sense of unease.

The small memory device in my hand felt far too heavy.

“What is on here?”

I took back the smartphone stored in the Zashiki Warashi’s cleavage and stuck the memory card inside.

The data was filled with English and my textbook knowledge of the language wasn’t nearly enough. It was a perfect example of test scores being of no practical use.

Hyakki Yakou’s leader, Hafuri, grimaced when she peered at the screen.

“119th Eastern Strategy Report… An inadequate counterintelligence system… An enemy from within… Risk simulation of a large scale terrorist attack in the near future… A negative chain reaction in the world economy produced by the fall of a single nation… 99.9%... Countermeasures… It is necessary we immediately reform the defense system even if it means temporarily taking administrative control from the Japanese government…”

Even the fragments I heard were enough to tell this was no normal report.

“What does that mean? Were the CIA and America trying to take over Japan to protect Japan? So is there some true enemy somewhere else?”

They had decided those extreme measures were necessary to deal with this enemy.

And that enemy remained untouched.

America had retreated without dealing with it.

So what did that mean?

What was going to happen to us…no, to the land we called home?

“The assumed enemy is a Japanese Spirit…a Youkai…”

Hafuri then spoke a single name.

“*The Blue Lamp*.”

An unpleasant sensation ran through my entire body.

That was not just a codename. Japanese Youkai sometimes had names that couldn’t be accurately represented in English. They were probably only using that strange name in place of its original name.

The blue light.

That was something we knew very well.

I recalled the name of the hopelessly deadly Youkai that we had created.

“Is this referring to the Aoandon!?”

I raised both arms to stretch my back.

Yes, it was such a nice popping feeling. My back didn’t actually make a noise, but that was the quickest way to describe that liberating feeling!

“Anyway, it looks like they failed.”

An entire island had been turned into a lie by an over-the-top plan that involved moving that entire island.

The national alteration Package using the Amanojaku had been quite a formidable foe. If it had been completed as my rival, the coming competition would have gotten a lot more interesting.

But the country had rejected their own savior.

That meant things were going to be more boring. Such a shame.

Not only would the sun be lowering in the sky for them, it would be vanishing beyond the horizon.

“Whoever our enemy is, our preparations are complete,” said an emotionless voice.

It came from the man standing next to me, Saiki Kazu.

From my point of view, I guess he was the human representative. A Youkai couldn’t draw out all of its power alone. I needed a convenient human around for the techniques only they could use.

I guess it was like the relationship between the foundation and the implementation. Or maybe the relationship between blazing fire and the precise machinery that kept a thermal power station running. It was more of a division of roles than a master/servant kind of thing.

“No matter what we set as our hypothetical enemy, it is logically impossible for it to shake the system we have set up.”

“I know. That’s why I’m so calmly daydreaming about all the different possibilities.”

I giggled as I answered.

A short form was running through the dark forest. It seemed to be an Amanojaku. It looked concerned by our presence, so I gave a quick wave.

“I am the condensed form of one hundred fears with more to spare, so if a Package including me is assembled, *it really will change the world*☆”

I pictured a few faces in my mind.

The one that had left the strongest impression was of course that boy.

That one trump card who had once driven me almost to death.

Jinnai Shinobu-kun.

“Now, how about we put them in checkmate?”

I smiled and urged the man along.

“Let’s fulfill the fears the people desire and answer their calling voices.”

Longing

“Ahh, ahh. Everything on the news just makes me sigh these days. It’s all so boring.”

“We can’t win. We’re doing our best, but this is all we get. There are so many champion schools here. We’re good enough to get at least to the qualifiers in any other district, so why are we stuck here?”

“Did you see that site? Type in your age, qualifications, and academic history and it’ll calculate out how much income you’ll earn in your lifetime. …You aren’t laughing? Why can’t you just laugh this off?”

“The election’s next week? It doesn’t matter. That isn’t going to change anything.”

“I don’t have the courage. I’m not the kind of person who can just talk to any boy. What am I supposed to do? Am I just going to sit here hesitating until someone else takes him?”

“What is this? This is hopeless. What even is a normalized score? If I’m separated from the rest here, how am I supposed to support myself for the next seventy or eighty years?”

“Oh, crap. At my age, you can’t find anyone even on this questionable dating site.”

“Why is it so hard to breathe?”

“Is everything I try a dead end?”

“How should I put it…”

“*Can’t something happen to just blow it all away?*”

Fine then. If that is what you all truly want, I will provide that thrill, that fear.

But once it begins, there is no turning back.

Afterword

Here we are at Volume 5!!

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This time, the theme was the Amanojaku. It's a strange Youkai that's name appears in everyday conversation with no connection to the occult, yet even the experts' opinions are split as to its origin. As a symbol of lies that always answers with a lie, that position left quite an impression on me, but what do all of you think?

At first glance, this series has a lot of eccentric behavior, but it's actually more human (for better or for worse) than the characters from my other series and it tends to move things along by saying "Well, there's no other way of solving this".

I emphasized that this time and created a conclusion that the characters are being inevitably swept toward and a conclusion that that they struggled until the end to achieve.

The Perfect Shinobu who appeared at the end of the "worst ending" in Side A is one possibility I pictured for Jinnai Shinobu's perfect form. He was not born to be a hero, so if he doesn't head down a new path himself, he would be stuck with an unchanging life (while giving up on a few things). But if he steps off the path, he can tumble down to the very bottom. That was what I was trying to briefly show, but what did you think?

He intentionally made use of how Youkai like him, he mastered both technology and the occult, he even made use of a girl from his class, he threw away everything, and he ran down the path of evil to overcome that great past and reclaim his life with the one heroine, the Zashiki Warashi. I really threw everything in there, but I'm fine with characters like that. C'mon, everyone loves ordering something with "everything on it"!! The story structure of the high school baseball player gradually improving over time isn't my kind of thing, but you can enjoy the story of a legendary hall-of-famer's exploits in an entirely different way and I don't think you can really say one or the other is better. I just wish I could create a world wide enough to include both kinds of enjoyment.

And in this story, I wanted to make a conclusion that wasn't the result of pre-installed elements or talents. I wanted it to come from the strength of the characters' choices influencing each other.

I suppose the main centerpiece was Singer Song Liar. Automatic songwriting software isn't all that rare these days and I hear it's looking like they might develop a program to mechanically write novels before long. As an author, I have to admit that something someone didn't work to make wouldn't be as enjoyable (although as an author, so I can continue writing them myself), but these days, you can type on a computer and have the kanji automatically chosen for you and you can instantly send the manuscript data to your editor over the internet. To the literary masters of the

past, things today are probably so convenient they would skip straight past anger and just feel exasperated.

Also, if you include things from other fields (like people casually wanting to make a movie or wanting to make a dream team in baseball or soccer), then “casually wanting to write a novel” is probably a pretty popular desire for a lot of people. That’s why I added in something a few steps ahead of that in this story. If a service like that really did exist, you would all want to use it, wouldn’t you?

In addition to the two-layer structure of Side A and Side B, another gimmick I used was having the characters in Side A act a little off. I casually put in things I couldn’t in my other series like having a protagonist die. I just hope you found it really exciting. And if you can guess why I’m not able to do that in my other series, you might be what is known as a “connoisseur”.

I give my thanks to my illustrator, Mahaya-san, and my editors, Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. The illustrations must have been tough with so many differently-colored locations like the casino, the mountain, the airport, and the cruise ship. I appreciate it all as usual.

And I give my thanks to the readers. I think the Kechibi might have been a little rare, but what did you think? There are still a ton of Youkai I want to put in the story, so I hope you will stick with me from here on too.

And I will end this here.

The hardest part of this one was coming up with the concrete “proof” for the end of Side B.

-Kamachi Kazuma